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A Study-of-Religion\s Based Framework for
Intercultural and Didactic Approaches

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between "Religion" and "Education" is extremely vast and complex. It extensively embraces broad issues such as "religious upbringing, religious education (and its various namesakes as a subject) and the curriculum, matters related to faith-based schooling, issues of religious identity, and the religious ideas of education" (Parker 2019:2). As such, it can be the object of research from a variety of scholarly perspectives. One of these may be from a juridical point of view, in the sense of inquiring into the legal frameworks between states and religious institutions in relation to the public and private educational facilities (e.g. López-Muñiz, De Groof and Lauwers 2006; Davis, Makoshika and Mudd 2013). There is also the perspective of the history of education, e.g. when research draws on sources from religious archives or when connections are investigated between religions and the provision of schooling in the past (see Raftery 2019). This is especially relevant when one considers that, before the state began to intervene in secularizing elements of schooling, "Religion" and "Education" were virtually synonyms. Often, the specialists of the religions were once the teachers (Parker 2019:6; cfr. also Saggioro 2019: 271, 273-5). There are also sociological perspectives, for which both "Religion" and "Education" are pivotal fields of enquiry, since they represent strong forces in shaping societies (see Berglund 2019). Obviously, there is also an educational science perspective. Differently from the previous ones, which are usually limited to a fundamentally descriptive approach, educational sciences involve logically also a much stronger normative dimension and approach.

We may narrow the issue of "Religion" and "Education" to the more determined object of a school subject in contemporary educational systems, generally referred to with the generic label *Religious Education* (hereafter: RE). However, we are still in front of a very complex situation. As a matter of fact, even if we limit ourselves to a region undergoing increasing standardization, such as the European Union, we may say that there is a specific kind of RE for each country. As a matter of fact, 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. Generally speaking, 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. 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). A quick glance at the European situation (*ib.* and cfr. in general Davis, Miroshnikova and Mudd 2013) shows how confessional RE is still the majority.[1]

Interestingly enough, the academic study of religion\s only recently began to inquire into the field of RE. Limiting ourselves again to the European context, within the EASR (*European Association for the Study of religion\s*) the *Working Group on Religion in Public Education* was established in 2007. [2] 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",[3] and is devoted itself 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 identarian discourses in RE (Jensen, T. and Kjeldsen 2013), socio-historical contextualization of RE (Giorda 2015), representation of religions in textbooks (Andreassen and 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 and 2017) and of actual practices (Frank and Bochinger 2008) or both (Jensen, T. 2017a). Along with these more descriptive works, others works have an explicit normative bend and push forwards the conceptualization and development of study-of-religion\s based RE didactics[4].

These study-of-religion\s (hereafter: SoR) based normative works represent quite a novelty in the gamut of similar research in RE. Indeed, as we noted earlier, a considerable portion of RE can be classified in various ways under the confessional category, and this considerably effects the educational research in RE in general. Both in individual national contexts, as well as in comparative and transnational perspectives, studies which are *not* SoR-based explore such topics as: the formation of religious identities in pupils and their agency in this regard (Smyth, Lyons, Darmody 2013); 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, De Souza, Durka and Gearon 2010:v); the religious, moral and spiritual dimensions of education. Non- SoR-based scholars justify their interest for this latter topic with the claim that it "has emerged a strong

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[1] Just to give some quantitative indication, out of 22 European countries examined in Davis, Miroshnikova and Mudd 2013, 16 belong to the confessional category.

[2] See http://easr.info/easr-working-groups/public-education/" Last access 15/11/2020.

[3] *Ib.* 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).

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

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, Durka, Engebretson, Jackson, McGrady 2009: xv).

This kind of perspective is not peculiar only to confessional-oriented RE. It can be found also in RE which present themselves as non-confessional, notably in the case of English RE. This latter will be a relevant subject in the present research for several reasons[5]: first, it is the oldest tradition of non-confessional RE in Europe, and by far the most influential beyond national borders. Second, it is characterized by a peculiar institutional framework which features various actors belonging to different groups and institutions. These are religious institutions, educational sciences scholars, scholars from the study of religion\s, officers and practitioners within the public educational system. Third, there is a lively, sometimes conflicting, debate on models, approaches and practices of RE. Here the academic study of religion\s is not neglected, but it is often applied in ambiguous and problematic ways, as I will describe in the 3rd chapter. In sum, English RE is a productive case-study of a long-established body of knowledge and practices that we will take into account in order to examine and discuss a good number of different epistemological, didactical and educational issues which can be encountered in a non-confessional RE.

As anticipated above, normative, i.e. educational and didactics-oriented works on RE from the perspective of the academic study of religion\s differ from the above cited approaches. First, they adopt an explicit a-religious stance, in the sense that they are not pro- nor anti-religions, and 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, especially in the 1st, 4th and 5th ones.

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[5] I discuss more in detail these motivations in the 3rd chapter (3.1).

The present work assumes that addressing the theme of the religious traditions which originated in the East and South of Asia[6] can be a productive move in order to reveal hidden spots, unquestioned assumptions and problematic areas in established non-confessional RE. Consequently, this study should contribute also to the incipient SoR-based RE normative studies, as it further corroborates their underlying principles, focuses more in detail on their aims, an adds new perspectives.

The use of the term "the religious traditions which originated in the East and South of Asia" implies the following issues: first it wants to avoid a distinction between a "Western" world, characterized only by three Abrahamic monotheism, 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 (see e.g. Csordas and Kurian 2015, Wormser 2015, Chong and 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 and Campany 2003: 317ff). Thirdly, by using a general 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, see *infra* 4.2.3). This prevents us from assigning to the religious traditions that we can find nowadays in modern national states a peculiar character exclusive only to those states. When considering e.g. Japanese or Chinese religions, especially in premodern 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 in Asia", 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. However, for the sake of writing, I will refer to them with "East Asian religions" or "East Asian religious traditions".

The reasons why I attribute this particular – albeit, I want to stress, not exclusive – 'illuminative' role to the theme of East Asian religions lies in the fact that these religious traditions have been

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[6] More in detail, the focus will be primarily on China and Japan, followed by the Asian sub-continent and those regions characterized by what is called today Theravada Buddhism (on this latter issue see Crosby 2013: 1-4). See in general 4th chapter.

subjected for a long time to different exotic and orientalist appropriations by Europeans who studied them (Inden 1986, Clarke 1997; App 2010). Consequently, a more critical and self-aware study of East Asian religions, informed notably by postcolonial and postmodern critiques, contributed to the rethinking (cfr. Turner and Salemink 2015; King 2017a) of the study of religion\s 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 a construction peculiar to the modern Euro-American cultural sphere, which, nonetheless, have been enshrined as a universal constant (Fitzgerald 2000, Masuzawa 2005, Josephson 2015). 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 Asian Religions in relation to developments in Euro-American cultural history, especially in the field of the study of religion\s (Faure 1993; King 1999; Snodgrass 2003; Keppens, Bloch, Hegde 2010; Dressler and Mandair 2011).

In other words, we may well say that the study of East Asian religions is strongly connoted by the following: a need to constantly rethink Christian-centric concepts related to 'religion', such as "faith", "beliefs", "(exclusive)belonging" and to avoid their uncritical application; a critical analysis of orientalist and colonialist epistemological dynamics based on the modern pretension of universality; a keen focus, given the present-day global relevance of East Asian religions at various levels of the dynamics of constructions of self- and hetero-representations related to identity concerns.

Therefore, the value of the theme of East Asian religions does not 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, with relevance also to the topic of intercultural and citizenship education. As a matter of fact, since the SoR based RE proposes itself first and foremost as being the most neutral perspective possible in a society characterized by increasing religious, anti-religious and a-religious plurality, the issue of how to live together, at various levels of communities (local, national, global), among persons with different horizons of reference, becomes logically a primary issue. Intercultural and citizenship education is not only acknowledged in the field of SoR based RE (see Alberts 2007: 74-83, 355-66, Giorda and Saggioro 2011: 170ff), but is a key topic also in non-confessional RE in general (cfr. 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" (30-1). It recommends that "appreciation of our diverse cultural background 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/ODHIR 2007) justifies its recommendations on the ground 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* (Keats 2007) and *Signposts – Policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious world views in intercultural education* (Jackson 2014).

Apart from this trend at the European institutional level to provide common guidelines concerning RE and intercultural education, we have just seen that the research on RE didactics based on the study of religion\s has also taken its first steps in a European context. Moreover, even in a presence of diversified RE in Europe, there are various networks of different RE actors, among which English RE is seen as a trend-setter. Therefore, the present research will mainly consider a European context.

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On the base of the previous considerations, the present work aims to investigate the topic of how to teach East Asian religions 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 ones such as English RE. More in detail, this work aims to produce a baseline theoretical framework which systematically analyzes and develops the various relevant implications that the theme of East Asian religions, approached from the perspective of the study of religion\s, may bring to the scholarly debate over non-confessional RE, with particular consideration to those educational aims characterizable as intercultural (UNESCO 2013) and democratic culture education (CoE 2018).

As it will be clearer in the upcoming synopsis of this work, since we are trying to discuss in a fairly comprehensive way the theme of East Asian religions within a SoR based RE, a quite extended range of different academic disciplines, as well as different relevant topics, is involved. These are the study of religion\s/s, Didactics, Intercultural Education and Area Studies. The topics are theory and methods of the study of religion\s, RE institutional frameworks and theoretical approaches, didactic transposition, intercultural competences, innovative findings in East Asian religions, issues of Orientalism, and so on. Therefore, I think it is more coherent to work mostly at a theoretical level, i.e.

taking in primary consideration what RE is *supposed* or *should be*, by relying on institutional frameworks, recommendations, models and theories of RE or intercultural education, in which the various information relevant to my aims can be found in a more systemic, albeit theoretical, way. Furthermore, an empirical study of actual school practices would have required in advance a sound theoretical reflection on how the various disciplines and topics above can be weaved together, and which should be the relevant principles and key points. An outcome that, ultimately, is the aim of this study. This does not mean that, when relevant, inputs from description or analysis of actual practices will not be taken in consideration. Given the general scope of the enquiry, focused on key theoretical points, the issue of diversification according to age level will not be dealt with.

The aspiration is to show how and what the study of the East Asian religions may contribute to the ongoing debate concerning the conceptual development of a SoR based RE didactics, and to provide a theoretical background upon which further research may be based, also including actual applications and empirical analysis concerning the teaching of East Asian religions in public schools.

To date, an attempt to build a comprehensive and systematic approach to the teaching of East Asian religions in public schools, from the standpoint of the academic study of religion\s and with the aim of fostering intercultural and citizenship competences, is still 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 and Lewis and De Angelis 2017) and, 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 and 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 in insightful but not systematic articles which provide practical tips, hits, and example of good practices in disparate and very specific topics, which often refer to global history classes. Furthermore, all the publications above cited refer to the U.S. context and rarely deal with intercultural issues.

The argument of this work will unfold in the following way: in order to rethink RE, one must define first the epistemological fields of reference concerning the two key concepts of RE, that is,

"Religion" and "Education". Since the present research is located within the field of the academic study of religion\s, the first chapter will engage with the epistemological status of this discipline. I will propose a brief sketch of its historical development which highlights how, after a process of critical self-rethinking and acknowledgment of the influence of Euro-American theological thinking, two main approaches can be discerned within the scholarship. The first one, while acknowledging the highly contested and problematic nature of the concept of "religion", seeks nonetheless to define it, and to build theoretical framework in order to investigate it. The fundamental reason for this endeavor is that, in order to inquiry into something, certain previous ideas, definitions, implicit or explicit theories of it are unavoidable. A second approach focuses instead on the 'problematic nature' of the concept of "religion", and critically delves into the various ways in which this very concept, which has a particular history tied to precise historical and geographical coordinates, has been conceived and imposed as a universal trait of mankind, while in reality it maintains strong characteristics peculiar to its origins, i.e. Christian and Protestant. I will argue that both approaches can be fruitfully adopted, also in the light of the fact that the basic methodology of research, which I explore in a certain detail, is still a common one.

The second chapter engages with the second key concept, "Education". After a sketchy exploration of the various layers of meaning of this word, I will argue that, since we are basically aiming at developing a school subject with a precise disciplinary-epistemological reference, i.e. the academic study of religion\s, we need to address the field of Didactics,[7] i.e. that discipline that focuses on the phenomenon of teaching-learning. More specifically we will deal with the field of Disciplinary Didactics, which focuses on the teaching-learning of a particular discipline. The exploration of the relevant ideas of this field will pass through a focus on the theory of didactic transposition, i.e. the conceptualization of the steps needed for a discipline to become a 'positive' learning and educational outcome for the pupil. Nonetheless, as I will show, no instructional endeavors can be divorced from an axiological-educational perspective that provide us with a reference frame to assess if a learning and educational outcome has been 'positive' or not. We have seen above how the issue of intercultural education is strongly linked to field of RE. Therefore, I will also discuss the relevant concepts and perspectives of this area of study, thus completing my position on the subject of "Education".

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[7] 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" (cfr. Hamilton 1999; Bertrand and Houssaye 1999).

These two initial chapters will also provide an analytical grid which will guide me through the investigation of established models, approaches and practices of RE in the 3rd chapter. As anticipated above, and as it will be contextualized further, the choice of English RE as a case-study will permit us to see various, at times discordant, approaches to RE. These approaches, presenting themselves as non-confessional, and generally acknowledging the role of the study of religion\s in the make-up of RE, will nonetheless provide insights also on many elements falling outside the disciplinary scope of the academic study of religion\s. 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". In addition, also the historical and institutional context of English RE will be explored.

In the 4th chapter the theme of East Asian religious traditions will be engaged. Following and deepening some key theoretical issues delineated in the 1st chapter, especially those highlighted by the critical/deconstructive approach, I will focus on those aspects of the study of East Asian religions that represent a challenge in respect to certain commonsensical, ingrained ways of thinking about religion and religious practice in general, and about 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 East Asian religions. 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 East Asian religious traditions, one cannot avoid taking the historical influence of modern Euro-American paradigms which are built on binary oppositions such as secularity/religions, 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 also to self-representations of Euro-American societies themselves. I define these stratified representations as an impactful cultural repertoire that must be duly reckoned with.

In the 5th and conclusive chapter I get back to the insights gained in the 2nd chapter to lay out a framework in which taking stock, in a more systemic way, of what has been explored in previous chapters. I will discuss the insights from previous chapters together with the conclusion and recommendations concerning the development of SoR based RE didactics made by other (few) scholars in the field. By doing so, the aim of this chapter will be twofold. First, to delineate the contours of the relevance of the theme of East Asian religions within the debate of non-confessional RE, addressing the field of the academic study of religion\s but also beyond, i.e. referring also to

English RE. Second, to produce a 'model' for the didactics of 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.

CHAPTER 1: THE STUDY OF RELIGION\S

1.1 Introduction

In the context of this investigation the first thing to do is to clarify the epistemological stance towards the first of the two subject matters of Religious Education. That is, "religion" - the other one being "education". The chosen approach is the one applied in the so-called "academic study of religion\s", understood as an empirical, historical and comparative discipline/field of studies, which deals with religion\s as a cross cultural phenomena. (Alberts 2007:9)

The use of backslash, as employed in other important publications (Stausberg and Engler 2016 and 2011) is intended to foreground the fact that, apart from studying what is typically referred to as religious, or what the scholars consider as religious, debates in this academic field frequently address theoretical and meta- theoretical questions regarding how to relate the variety of religions to each other with the singular "religion" as the conceptual point of reference.

This further corroborates the choice of the study-of-religion\s approach. As it will be clear from the following brief historical sketch and further considerations, 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 reflected critically on the universal applicability of the term "religion" 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 (scientific, as some scholar would put, e.g. Weibe 1999: ix.) towards an important element of human culture, which is at the same time both elusive and taken for granted.

In other words, the academic study of religion\s has developed approaching both "religion" and "religions", valorizing the intrinsic plurality and complexity of its object\s, critically reviewing its analytical tools and avoiding examining any religious phenomena under criteria typical of certain religious traditions, notably Christianity. For these reasons, the study of religion\s, as an empirical, historical and comparative discipline is a valid, if not the best, candidate for laying the epistemological bases of an inclusive and self-reflecting RE within a context of intercultural and democratic education.

1.2 Discipline or field of study?

Some notes on the identification of the study of religion\s as a discipline are in order; the question whether the study religion\s is a separate discipline or a field of study is disputed since its very beginning (Stausberg 2007: 303 n. 321). As field of study, in English-speaking contexts it has been referred to as *Religious Studies*, identifying it as a loose set of disciplines investigating religion under different approaches, sociological, psychological and even theological ones. *Comparative Religion* is another term used, especially in the U.S., that reflects the interest in the plurality of its object\s of study. The *History of religions,* on the other hand, reflects the historical-philological origins of the study of religion\s and it is still present in the name of the international organization of reference for scholars studying religion\s: the *International Association for the History of Religions*. In the 1950s, among scholars around the world - with Western European scholars being the trend setters - there was a broad consensus on the fact that what was peculiar to the field, characterizing it as a defined discipline and distinguishing it from other scholarly enterprises which study religion, was the historical approach. This consensus weakened in subsequent decades. In the early 1990s an attempt was made to replace 'history' with 'study' in many sub-branches of IAHR, such as in the *European Association for the Study of religion*. This indicates a broader self-understanding on the part of scholars. In particular, it indicates an openness to the social sciences and contemporary issues. (Geertz and McCoutcheon 2000:9-10; Stausberg 2008:24).

There are also linguistic variants, as the Italian *Scienze della religione* ("science of religion")*,* which stress the plurality of the disciplines involved, while at the same time addressing a common, self-reflexive scientific method focused on theoretical and methodological problems in order to help interdisciplinary dialogue. (Filoramo 2019: 21). Other variants such as French *Sciences des Religions* maintain the plurality of both disciplines and the object, while German *Religionswissenschaft* points to a single discipline and a plural object. Outside the Indo-European linguistic context, the Japanese *shūkyōgaku* is roughly translatable as 'religiology' or ' the study of religion', but the official translation by the Japanese branch of the IAHR is "religious studies".[8] Indeed, there is tension between the identification of a single 'discipline' of the history or study of religion\s (with its social, political and economic implications within and without the university) and the stress on its 'interdisciplinary' or even 'transdisciplinary' character (as it draws methods and insights from history, archeology, philology, psychology, etc..) (Geertz and McCoutcheon 2000:6).

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[8] http://jpars.org/english/ last access 01/11/2019.

If, to identify a 'discipline' one must have a distinctive subject of study and a methodology, the study of religion\s neither has an exclusive claim on a subject (with a range of other disciplines sharing an interest in religion), nor does it have a distinctive methodology. However, Stausberg and Engler (2011) argue that the study of religion\s, at least in its present form, is indeed a distinct academic discipline on two grounds. First, it has "shared theoretical frameworks", "mutually comprehensible vocabulary", "paradigmatic examples", and "negotiated and legitimated history of research", with the addition of the epistemological rejection of theology (130). Secondly, beyond hard criteria such as epistemic properties, the study of religion\s has organizational and social dimensions, where malleable processes of exclusion and inclusion take place with regard to what is negotiated and established as 'fit', as much as 'true' (Stausberg 2016: 776). In other words, the identification of the study of religion\s as coherent discipline is based 1) on its recognition by institutions such as universities, 2) on the existence of organizations in which the discussion of common topics and the negotiation of explicit and implicit rules takes place, and 3) on the work of the transmission of the discipline that socialize students in a "characteristic set of thoughts, behaviours, and sensibilities, where they ideally identify with a discipline" (Stausberg and Engler 2011: 131).

Concerning the tension between disciplinary boundaries and the interdisciplinarity character, it could be argued that the study of religion\s is an object-oriented science, whereas others are more methods-oriented, such as sociology and psychology. These latter ones feature various fundamental assumptions, organizing frameworks, theories, and research methodologies, such that very different topics (and not only religion) can be investigated while researcher can still fruitfully exchange ideas and data about them (Lee A. Kirkpatrick 2010 p. 300). In other words, the subject matter of the more method-oriented disciplines overlaps partially with the subject matter of the study of religion\s, and this is where the innovation of interdisciplinarity can take place. On the other hand, where the overlap is greater, i.e. there is competition over the subject matter, the claim to the innovative character of such interdisciplinarity enterprise is suspicious. And this is the case with theology (Stausberg and Engler 2011: 132).

1.3 A brief history of the field and its relationship with theological thinking

Concerning the problematic relation[9] with religionist and theological approaches, we cannot go more in detail than a brief historical sketch. Therefore, in order to highlight this issue, a deliberately

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[9] Weibe points to a "historic relation of the study of religion to the religious and theological concern of the society in which the enterprise first appeared" (1999: x)

simplistic narrative is adopted. It is widely affirmed that the roots of the study of religion\s belong to the Enlightenment and to its critique of religion and its liberation of the study of humanity from a theological framework. On the axiom of the universality of reason, also religion became a 'universal' of humanity, not a monopoly of a single tradition. A move that still informs present day conceptions of religion (Filoramo 2004 p. 29-30). However, other scholars (cfr. Stasuberg 2008:17) point instead to the Romantic critique of the Enlightenment as the birth-era of the study of religion\s, in particular with the work of philosopher and theologian Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* (1799), in which it is argued for the autonomy of religion as a phenomenon irreducible to other factors. Apart from the Enlightenment and Romantic heritage, other factors can be accounted for in the birth of the academic study of religion\s. These are the development of historiographical methods, missionary activities, colonialism, the subsequent translation of hitherto unintelligible writings, the discovery of the families of languages, and the formation of the theory of evolution. All these factors can be symbolically embodied in Max Müller (1823-1900), who is considered the founder of the discipline:

Geertz (Geertz 2004:109f) indicates him as the pivotal figure as in the first, "formative" or "classical" phase, of the four phases in which the history of the academic study of religion\s can be divided. Max Müller was interested in comparative studies in linguistics and religion. His often-cited phrase: "who knows one knows none" underlies how for him the study of different religions - called by him "comparative theology", was a necessary prerequisite for enquiring into religion in general - "theoretical theology". Müller was committed to the study of religion\s as an autonomous science (cfr. Weibe 1999: 9-31). At the same time, he was theologically convinced that such rigorous scientific investigation would point to the essential unity of religions and that the retrieval of such pure origins would be beneficial to the Christian faith (cfr. Stenski 2015: 34-36).

The second phase (the first 60 years of the 20th century) was characterized by two trends: the functionalist and substantialist approaches to the concept of religion. The first is often reflected in those individual disciplines which emerged in a positivistic cultural climate envisioning the possibility of studying human nature in a manner similar to the natural sciences. These were the first social sciences of psychology, sociology and anthropology, which dealt with religion only as a part (albeit an often important one), and *in function,* of their general research object, being it psyche, society or culture. Especially for psychology and sociology, there was a particular concern for the role of religion in front of modernity. Important figures like Durkheim, Van Gennep, Freud or Max Weber contribute with important investigations into religion\s, but still from a particular angle, be it social cohesion, rituals, psychological repression and catharsis, motivation and normativity (Filoramo 2004: 51- 64).

The coeval substantialist approach, emerged from a cultural *mileu* opposed to positivism and evolutionism, and was informed by trends such as Bergson's vitalism or Dilthey's *Geistwissenchaften*. Here "religion" started to be seen as an autonomous entity, whose essence, concealed behind the multifarious manifestations of religion\s, could be reached by comparing these manifestations reduced to their "ideal structure", and then empathetically attuning with the believer's point of view. The methodological presupposition for all of this was the suspension of judgment or *epochè*, typical of Husserl's phenomenological approach, whence the name of this trend of study: "Phenomenology of religion". It is in such context that the problematic relation with theology or a religionist approach in general appears more starkly. The birth of phenomenology of religion can be traced back to the late 19th century Netherlands, where the study of religion\s was introduced very early as an academic discipline but, as Molendjik explains (2005:71f), it has been more of a transformation of theology into science of religion, with the implicit acceptance of the liberal 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 for establishing the study of religion\s as an academic enterprise on its own (cfr. Cox 2006 3-4) and in order to do this they needed new conceptual terms to define religion as a *sui generis* phenomenon. The most famous of them is the "sacred" which, through the famous bestseller *Das Heilige* (1917) of 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 the intellectual scene of the discipline was dominated by the phenomenological approach. (Stausberg2009: 265) The most (in)famous phenomenologist of religion was Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), whose formulation of the methods to grasp the *sui generis* essence of religion throughout its historical manifestations has proven influential in securing autonomous departments in public universities in North America (Geerz & McCoucheon 2000: 7). However, such approach to religion as *sui generis* phenomenon, deserving *sui generis* theory and method, progressively came to be criticized in two intertwined terms: on one hand, it is accused of being a crypto-theology in that it presupposes an a-historical, metaphysical unity of all empirical manifestation of what we call religion; on the other hand, it fails to recognize religion as a historical reality inextricably interconnected with all the other range of human social activities.[10] The IAHR conference in Marburg in 1960 witnessed a shift away from these religionist understandings towards

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[10] There is plenty of bibliography that critically examines these issues, most notably Smith (1978), Asad (1993) McCoutcheon (1997), Weibe (1999), Flood (1999), see also *infra* 1.7.4.

a conception of the discipline in a pure anthropological sense: 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 the study of religion\s should be conceived as a branch of the Humanities that should approach the religious phenomena as creation and feature of human culture, and that it should study them as empirical facts without resorting to any 'transcendental truth' (cfr. *ib*. 2000: 15-16).

From 1970s onwards the rejection of phenomenology started to be the standard premise to any contemporary attempts at self-understanding within the field (Stausberg 2009: 267). At the same time, a need was expressed for more explicit theoretical and methodological frameworks, and for a reconceptualization of religion as an historical reality interwoven with other aspects of human culture that must be engaged in empirical-based research. This latter should, on one hand, develop towards the use of innovative social theories and models. On the other hand, it should envision the study of religion\s in "terms of the larger (theoretical) project of studying human society and culture" (Geertz McCoutcheon 2000: 23-24).

1.4 Implication of the reflexive turn

Starting from the 1960s, the development of deconstructionism, and later of 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 Michael Foucault and Edward Said. In recent decades a vast and influential body of scholarly literature critically investigated the history, genealogies and implications of the very idea of "religion" understood as a clear, distinct if not altogether autonomous and universal sphere of human reality. By doing so, scholars challenged the treatment and conceptualization of the term "religion" as separated from e.g. the domains of power or politics. On the ground that the present-day concept of "religion" developed in a precise historical and geographical context - i.e. Europe – in the form of dialectical "counterpart" of the modern statecraft, scholars critiqued 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.

I will discuss these issues later (see *infra* 1.7). For now, I just want to highlight how the study of religion\s is presented nowadays with a dilemma, with important consequence 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, it is among its duties to critically reflect on its own past and present frameworks, 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. (See e.g. Schilibark 2018).

The solution suggested by Alberts (2017a: 260-263) is to continue the reflexive investigation within the discipline, which could also be considered as its contribution to society in the form of 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 phenomena called "religions". That "religion" or other related concepts has been denied universal validity does not mean that the discipline is left without any 'facts'. 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 J. 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.

Bearing in mind both the 'constructive' and 'deconstructive' natures of the discipline, I will proceed to discuss briefly the theoretical tools of the former that inform my framing of "religion" as object of enquiry, and then discuss what are the important critical issue that a self-reflective study of religion\s cannot avoid taking into due account, especially when dealing with Asian religions. The methodological side of the field will be also taken in due account.

1.5 Definition(s) of religion and identification of the subject matter

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 (e.g. 'religion is belief in god') is supposed also to be tested against the empirical reality (e.g. evidences that people hold beliefs in multiple superhuman agents) and therefore retooled and refined accordingly ('religion is beliefs in one or more gods').

However, not all scholars felt the need to establish a starting definition. Among classical theorists, Weber points out in his *The Sociology of Religion* (1993 [1920]) that definition of religion could be attempted only as the conclusive result of a study of religion\s (1). This position is shared by others who avoid a starting definition and, automatically, rely on contemporary, everyday understanding of religion, which is left implicit or unexplained.

 Others may object the very need of definition, on the basis that there is no religion in the first place, since it could be reduced to other social, political and economic spheres (McCutcheon 1997), or because it should be conceived primarily as a creation of scholars (Z. Smith 1998). Other objections have been made on the ground that defining religion refrains the colonial attempts to impose one's own worldview on others (see below 1.7.2). On this point Berguner argues (2014: 253-255) 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. Among them, there is the simple observation that, 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. (cfr. Schontal 2016). For study purposes, definitions enhance clarity and explicit one's own position. By defining religion, we do not merely delimitate the area of enquiry but also hint to the way in which we approach it. If we say e.g. "religions is belief about superhuman agents" it could follow that our enquiry will focus on the intellectual dimension, thus neglecting social or bodily features like rituals.

There exist various types of definition (not mutually exclusive) and at least two conceptions of definition (mutually exclusive). Concerning the latter, a definition could be conceived as entailing 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*, which means also that 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*, implemented in order to advance our understanding of it. However, since definitions are usually short sentences, this critical distinction between *equivalen*ce and *elucidation* is rarely explicit. Therefore, it is crucial to state it in advance to avoid misinterpretation. 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 (cfr. Stausberg and Gardiner 2016: 12-13).

Concerning the various types of definitions, especially up until the 60s, the definitions proposed by the study of religion\s can be considered *real*, i.e. they refer to an ontological existing reality, which is 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 phenomenologists, their postulation of the existence of the sacred, and their definition of religion as being the relation with it. It applies also to definitions and theories that reduce religion to other dimension of human existence. For example, Marxist interpretation of religion as reflection of distressful material conditions (cfr. Day 2016:162-163) are nonetheless committed to the reality of religion. The still influential definition from Clifford Geertz (1966) 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" (cfr. Stausberg and Gardiner 2016:16). Here is Geertz definition:

> *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 original).

Real definitions imply, by their own nature, a certain idea of absolute specificity (*sui generis*) of religion. Since definitions of this kind seek to grasp the common essence beyond any particular case, if something does not conform to the definition, it cannot qualify as religion. Given the constructionist turn in the study of religion\s, scholars tend to avoid this kind of definition, as it brings with it the problem of universality, which in turn entails the neglect of important considerations: that religions innovate and change through time (together with their self-understanding), that they feature synchronous multiplicity of forms and functions, and that religion is a concept of European origin. (Stausberg and Gardiner 2016:23).

However, this does not mean that scholars are not entitled to think about definition as an *interpreting strategy* for certain social patterns that exist in the world (cfr. Schilbrack 2010: 1121-1126). In other words, avoiding *real* and *equivalence* definitions and opting 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 is deemed as distinctively religious. Examples vary. There

is the famous definition of Tillich (1960), which focuses on the pragmatic effects that religion has on the individual in ranking his/her purpose in the world:

> 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).

Another classical definition, one from Durkheim (1995 [1912]), focuses instead on the role of religion in establishing cohesion:

> *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* (44, italics in original).

Another definition - a contemporary one - that fits this type is from Tweed (2006):

> *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* (54, italics in original).

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 the pragmatic effect of his/her religion. And again, if this function is too specific, it could ignore historical change (Stausberg and Gardiner 2016: 18). In any case, the most common objection concerns the risk of widening too much the field of enquiry. Since pure functionalist definitions of religions are often open-ended and inclusive in term of number and type of functions, in their aim to cope with the vast empirical variety of functions performed by religions, they could end being applicable also to other phenomena such as national ceremonies, sports events or even shopping (cf. Schilbrack 2013: 291-292, 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. The most famous substantial definition is from Edward B. Taylor, who holds that the minimal definition, i.e. the binding criterium, of religion is "the belief in spiritual beings" (Taylor 2016 [1871]: 424). Another example is from Edward Spiro (1966):

...an institution consisting of culturally patterned interactions with culturally postulated superhuman agents (96).

The risk with substantial definitions, especially if they want to have elucidative power, is to appeal, as criteria, to vague and ambiguous terms that actually need further definition. This is the case of the reference, as classical phenomenologist would do, to elusive concepts such as the "holy" or "the sacred". Similarly, the difficulty in this kind of definition is to find criteria that are flexible enough to stand up to counterexamples. Is the "belief in spiritual beings", or belief at all, central to e.g. Confucianism? How does the criterium of "superhuman agents" works in front of impersonal principles like *mana* or the mechanism of *karman*? It is easy to see how substantive definitions suffer the exact inverse problem of functionalist definitions, i.e. lack of flexibility, whereas the latter are too flexible.

For this reason, another strategy is to unite the two types. Indeed, many functionalist definitions contain in themselves some substantive criteria. If we are to define religion e.g. as a way to overcome suffering, then the focus on suffering would become our substantive criterium. In the case of Durkheim, we can recognize as criteria being a "unified system" and dealing with "things set apart and forbidden" (cfr. Pace 2007: 16). On the grounds that many beliefs, practices and institutions commonly called religious actually satisfy both kinds of definition, Schilbrack (2013) offers his "dithetic" definition (i.e. that identify two necessary features for classifying religion):

practices, beliefs, and institutions that recommend normative paths based on superempirical realities (313).

This definition indicates what religions "do", i.e. they elaborate norms that define ways of living, on the base of what is the "specific focus" of religions, i.e. "superempirical 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" (*ib.*). For example, religions may affirm that the sense of justice comes from God. 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" (315-318).

What we can see here is another characteristic of definitions: apart from being objectual, i.e. to define a thing, they can instead refer to the word(s) constituting the *definiendum*. One of the most straightforward definitions in this sense is of Jonathan Z. Smith (1998):

[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 (281-2).

Another widely cited expression in this regard is the dictum of philosopher Alfred Korzybski (1879-1950) "map is not territory" (especially in Z. Smith 1978, p. 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". As it is an abstract analytic term, it will be inevitable to find some fuzzy borders, for example between "magic" and "religion", but 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 (see 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. These insights have proven useful in social sciences (cfr. Needham 1975) in the form of polythetic classifications and definitions. Instead of former definitions that demand strict satisfaction of one or more necessary criteria (as in the case of Schilbrack's dithetic definition), polythetic definitions feature more criteria but do not require that all have to be satisfied. This is the case of Jeppe Jensen (2014) who offers a two-layered definition. The first part lays out some substantial criteria, which are then further expanded through a number of "elements and aspects" that "religions at specific times may have any weighted combination" thereof (8). Moreover, this definition is explicitly offered as a stipulative one, i.e. that pragmatically intend to reflect as much consensus in the field as possible:

[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. (*ib.*)

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 religion? For example, taking into consideration, from Jeppe Jensen's examples, only "ethics and morality" and "hierarchy and group relations", sounds questionable. And, more importantly, what are the reasons for clustering certain elements and not others? In order to avoid an arbitrary selection of elements it may be necessary to refer to a concrete example that serves as an orienteering prototype. The problem then becomes: who could decide what such a prototypical religion is without being accused of either ethnocentrism or xenocentrism?

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 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. However, stating that there is hierarchy or necessity of some elements calls for an explanation of such relationships between primary and secondary elements. In other words, a theory of the underlying mechanism (e.g. rituals have precedence over belief for XY reasons) must be provided. This situation could be appropriate in cases in which this kind of definition is expected to be the clarifying and explicative synthesis at the end of a theoretical enquiry into the object "religion". Conversely, it may not be suited for delineating the subject matter prior to theorizing.

For this task, polythetic definitions like Jeppe Jensen's may be more adapt, especially if one wants to extensively overview this field of study. Indeed, he himself presents it at the onset of a study that is offered as an interpretation and explanation of the various elements (and their relationship) of the said definition, as an attempt to provide the backbone of the study of all religions and of religion in general (2014:169).

1.6 Theoretical approaches to religion

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. more or less sophisticated theories, paradigm 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 been already identified as something that is informative to call "religion". "Even when not constructing theories of

religion, scholars operate with implicit theories of religion" (Stausberg and Engler 2016: 67). Due to the nature of the object "religion" as very theory-sensitive one, it follows that reference to the history of studies is needed more than in other disciplines, 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 (Jensen J. 2014: 13-4).

Catherine Bell (2006) individuates five paradigms, chronologically arranged, that work behind the concept of religion. They are structured as a sort of boxes within boxes, in the sense that even if a paradigm is said to have surpassed the previous ones, it still contains hints at them. The first is "Christianity as Prototype" and indicates how Christianity provided all the assumptions with which religious culture, from various historical and geographical contexts, have been addressed. For example, in various historical contexts and occasions Jews were often seen by Christians as misguided brothers due to their shared textual base and common roots. Similarly, Islam has often been seen as the very perversion of a (monotheistic) religion and defined both ideologically and geographically the borders of Christianity (31). Even if the next paradigm "Religion as the Irrational" (Bell 33-4) should have overcome the previous one, critical thinkers of religion such as Nietzsche or Freud were still based on individual introspection of their familiar tradition, i.e. an "individualistic" theorical approach, influenced by, and focused on, modern Christianity (Jensen J. 2014: 27). Again, even if the present days are supposed to be flagged by the paradigms of "world religions" or "religion as western construction" (cfr. Bell 2006: 34-6, 38-43, on these issues see *infra* 1.7.1 and 1.7.4), the "first person bias" of this approach is still widespread, because it comes from the natural intuition that one acts because of his belief. This is reflected e.g. in the investigation on religiosity of the individuals by psychology, or more problematically by the still common idea that "believers know best" (Jensen J. 2014: *ib.*; on the insider/outsider problem see *infra* 1.8). These are none but examples to show that, even if one can be religiously agnostic or even atheist, when studying religion being totally unbiased in terms of theory is almost impossible.

Stausberg and Engler (2016) 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 religion, to the conceptualization of religion as a discursively construed idea with absolutely no external reference. In the middle, various degrees of realism and constructivism are possible (see e.g. Engler 2004). This is an important point, particularly in the light of the reflexive turn of the study of religion\s, which concerns not only epistemological issues (do we have to study what we deem "religious" or how these things came to be defined as "religious"?) but also political ones (what were the motivations and power relations involved in defining something as "religious"?).

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, see e.g. Pace 2007: 66), especially in order to support analytical and hermeneutical 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 how religion could be (more or less) distinguished from other domains of human activity, such as economy or politics. It entails also asking if such distinction is reflected by the data or the persons taken into consideration as religious, or if it is a heuristic move of the theorist.

The fourth point is the condition for the emergence of religion. This should not be confused as having to do with the historical beginning or primordial evolutionary phase of religion. It refers instead to the factors or the mechanism by which the phenomenon "religion" emerges. Or, at least, the condition in which those features deemed typical of "religion" comes starkly to the fore. 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.

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 and Engler 2016: 65). Whereas a well-known *effect* of religion is social stability, it would be naive to conceive it 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, see Pace 2007: 38-40).

Theorizing about religion can take two approaches. Top-down theories usually apply a conceptual apparatus (es. 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, postcolonialism, 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.

As a recent example of the latter, the work of Thomas Tweed (2006) can be briefly presented. Tweed starts its theorizing from his observation gathered in his field-work among Catholic Cubans refugees in Florida, and tells us that he aims towards a conceptualization of religion which is empirical, in the sense that it tries 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" (54). His take on theory, similarly, is to offer more of a flexible "way of travel" to see things in movements (including the theoretician, who is not external) rather than a fixed scheme from a vantage point. I have already cited his definition[11] which basically is 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*" (2005: 54, italics in original). Tweed uses the term "confluences" in two important senses: first, they are plural because no scholar will ever encounter *religion*, as this is just the conceptual horizon of the scholar, but only *religions.* Secondly, the trope "confluences" underlines how religions are "not reified substances but complex processes" (59) of multiple elements, whose merging have anyway certain features that do not lend them to be reduced to other confluences, like "economy" or "politics". The interaction and intercausality between "confluences" however, is contemplated (60). The multiple elements themselves merging in religions are qualified as "flows", that means, phenomena that cross time and space, like generational transmission and development of certain practices, knowledge, artifacts or institution, or the geographical expansion of these 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 a certain 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 the 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 how religions have emotional dimensions as much as cognitive ones, and how religions actually hold on their practitioners. The second characteristic is the reference to superhuman forces (personal like gods and ancestors or impersonal like *karman*) which nonetheless can be embodied also in human beings, e.g. the idea of embryo of Buddha-nature within men (73). The third characteristic refers to the two main

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[11] Which is self-ironically judged not very transparent by Tweed himself (*ib.*).

modalities in which religions perform their tasks: "making home" and "crossing". The first term refers to the functions of religion of situating the practitioners in space and time, starting from their individual bodies (by gendering them, by stating that are made of impermanent bodies and permanent souls, etc.), to the whole cosmos (with various cosmologies). In between there are the various religious frames that inform ideas about household, society and homeland. The second term 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). Religions can be seen as particularly apt to foster them by virtue of their capacity of coping with the uncertainty and difficulties in overcoming physical, social and existential constrains (73-7, with more details in chapters 4 and 5).

We can see that Tweed responds to the questions of the ontological status and distinctiveness of religion: it is a fuzzy phenomenon, stipulated to be religious, because it has nonetheless typical features 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 remaining question, the structure or components of religion, is somehow the sum of the answers to the previous ones. It has an 'internal' structure of 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 and Reader 2007). Indeed, when a theory is presented as an "itinerary", it is plausible that is intended to illuminate rather than explain on well-defined grounds (that could be falsified) what is religion, and this is reinforced by Tweed's preference to use the adjective "religious", rather than a substantive (Tweed 2006: 77-9).

There are also examples of rather different kinds of theorizing about religion, offered by the cognitive sciences of religion (CSR), that will be briefly presented[12]. The reasons for taking into account CSR are many: they are considered "a major breakthrough in the study of religion\s" (Jensen J. 2009:129) and, indeed, a publication of 2009 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 2009: 9). Discussing CSR is above all to deal with the opposite spectrum of the modality of theorizing religion in respect to, e.g., Tweed. We have just seen, nonetheless, that he felt somehow compelled to take into account also the CSR approach in his conceptualization of "organic-cultural flows".

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[12] I draw this rather sketchy account mainly from other summaries such as Geertz 2004, Martin 2006, Jensen J. 2009, Saler 2009, Geertz 2016, White C. 2017, 2018 and Natale Terrin 2019.

CSR employs a top-down approach on the subject matter "religion" by applying on 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 C. 2017: 107).

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 base: mental representations are ultimately brain states, while public representation could be vibration of air particles (oral expression), ink on pages (textual expression), movements of the limbs (bodily expression), etc. Due to the common material base, reproduction and distribution of representation among individuals can be explained with causal chains: mental representations cause public representation 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, are explained by resorting to a certain theory of mind, according to which human cognition universally functions with differently specialized 'modules' or 'domains'. E.g., a module is devoted to face recognition, or recognition of living entities. The spreading of a public representation depends on the extent to which it exploits or stimulates a certain human cognitive module (see Jensen J. 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 fieri*, the best bet is to interpret it with the most significant possibilities at our disposal, i.e. that things are 'alive' and furthermore humanlike (see Saler 2009).

The previous idea resonates with the next one. Justin Barret, a developmental psychologist, hypothesizes that human mind has developed an embedded "Hyperactive Agency Detection Device" (HADD) which compels humans to constantly being alert to detect agents, even when they are implausible: in evolutionary terms, "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 are Pascal Boyer's "counterintuitive ideas". Here at work again there is the conceptualization of mind as a complex of innate cognitive 'modules' or 'templates'. More in detail, Boyers builds on the theory than humans have 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. Boyer's contribution consists in showing that 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. For example, a spirit, insofar has a mind, goes under the domain of *person*, but with the physical proprieties breach of being invisible. A talking animal is an example of psychological transfer from the *person* domain to the *animal* domain. 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 (140-3).

How such counterintuitive ideas are transmitted and work in religions is dealt with in the other two foundational hypotheses. With his concept of "two modes of religiosity" Harvey Whitehouse wants to explain on 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 over time the same religious teachings, 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" by Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley poses religious ritual as a sub-type of human action, which means that the way in which humans think of rituals or any other type of action depends on the same cognitive scheme involving an "actor", an "act" and a "recipient of action". What characterizes religious rituals is the culturally postulated claims about the presence of a superhuman agent, whose capacity is beyond human possibility, and the expectation of an effect by such ritual. Apart from differentiating "religious from otherwise ordinary kinds of human behavior, while explaining the common cognitive basis of both" (Luther 2006: 477), Lawson and McCauley further hypothesize that when the superhuman agent is the actor of the ritual, such rituals

require little or no repetitions, and are usually emotionally and visually salient, e.g. a wedding. If the superhuman agent is instead the recipient of action, ritual repetition is expected, such as the case of offerings and sacrifices.

If we are to apply the above mentioned five constitutive points of theory to this resumé of CSR foundational ideas, we can conclude that this approach broadly agrees that, concerning religion ontological status, "there is no single entity that constitutes religion but there are discernible patterns of thought and behavior that can be called "religion" (White C. 2017: 100). Concerning distinctiveness, CSR seem mainly interested to start from previous theories of what is characteristic of religions (e.g. culturally postulated superhuman agents) and see afterwards if a distinct category of religion is meaningful (cfr. White C. 2018: 38-9). Their strength is, evidently, their explicative power in naturalistic terms of the origin or conditions for religious thought and behavior to arise. This affects, however, the remaining two points of "components" and "functions" of religion. CSR fractionate and reduce religion into meaningful units that recur cross-culturally, but such a psychological universalism requires methodological individualism, as 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 to as emotions, representations, beliefs, intentions, etc., instead of texts, institutions, social practices, monuments, material culture, etc.

However, this does not mean that endorsing CSR implies a total reductionist approach in explaining religion (not to say *interpreting*), as the E-religion dimension (in CSR terms, "contextual socio-cultural constrains") is still considered relevant as much as the panhuman cognitive constrains (White C. 2018: 42). Moreover, 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 this section, merely a consequence of the 'theoretical lenses' one puts on.

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At this point, it could be asked which kind of 'constructive' theoretical approach to religion would better serve building the epistemological base of RE. However, in order to answer, "education" has still to be investigated, not to say also the 'deconstructive' side of theorizing religion. What it can be safe to say, for now, is that a religious education focused on Asian religions, and aimed at fostering intercultural competences, should take a broad encompassing perspective and guide interpretation between fuzzy borders, rather than offering precise explanation on the ground of 'hard' facts.

However, this does not mean that CSR findings cannot be incorporated, not only in full-fledged 'itinerant' theory as in the case of Tweed, but also in broadly general treatment of religion as in Jeppe Jensen (2014), for whom religion is "many 'things' in varying proportion" (162). A set of things, moreover, which shows how 'religion' is not "ontologically mysterious nor is it epistemically intractable" (ix):

imagination, experience, intentionality, narrative, discourse, classification, cognitive governance, emotion regulation, action, behaviour, roles, social control, authority, institutions, power, economies, exchanges, reciprocity, sociality and world-making. (163)

For Jeppe Jensen, to differentiate I-religion from E-religion is an useful distinction, as it marks indeed 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. from above citation), while inside-the-head religions are studied by psychologists and cognitive scientists (e.g. imagination, emotion regulation, cognitive governance, etc. from above citation). 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 externalized, i.e. became E-religion, through collective intentionality and constitutive rules. At the same time, through social acculturation, E-religion is internalized (I-religion) by individuals (41-7).

Since we see the above cited "things" in phenomena that are products of human mind, and since these phenomena feature a polythetic set of common characteristics (separation between ordinary and special/sacred, superhuman agents, notion of afterlife, ideas of the order of cosmos, how humans should think and act...), there is plausibility to use "religion" as an abstract category (in the same way as "art", "sport", "economy", "language") to cover a wide range of human behavior, by applying ideal-types categories informed by both E-religion and I-religion theories. These categories are regrouped by three main sets of "belief, ideas and representation", "practices and behaviours", and "institutions" (intended as "network of norms, rules, and values") (133).

1.7 The reflexive/critical turn in the study of religion\s

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' religion, but by an

"ongoing commitment to the reproduction of the language game of religion itself" (7). If we limit ourselves to these statements, such perspective does not differ greatly from the above-mentioned acknowledgement of the role of theory in building consistently 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. In other words, this concept cannot really stand apart from all other 'religious' worldviews. Consequently, the self-proclaimed secularist approach, i.e. that which is supposed to being outside, external and 'untainted', fails to live up to its ideals of objectivity and critical distance for the very reason that both "secular" and "religion" are the results of a twin birth of the Enlightenment, in particular, and of 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". The concept of "religion" has been (and still is) instrumental for defining, and coping with, modernity, both internally and externally. Internally, we have the example of Durkheim's exploration of the elementary forms of religions. 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) and therefore he was looking at what is happening within the most possible primitive and simpler society, i.e. the supposed opposite of the modern one (King 2017b:17, Nye 2019:18-9). Externally, "religion" has been a useful category to configurate a constellation of ideas such as "Europe", the "West", "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 to establish 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 and Mandair 2011: 14-5).

In other words, the narrative of religion, as a thing in itself, that existed as inherently distinct from other realms of culture and society, and that became separated only in modern times, first in the "West" and then in the "Rest" by expanding modernization, together with the supposed neutrality and objectivity of the related concept for "religion", is undermined by theoretical, historical and ethical critiques. From a theoretical and historical point of view, a genealogy of the idea of religion, or of the differentiation of the "secular" and the "sacred", reveals a variety of conceptualizations inextricably tied to the particularity of their historical, cultural and political contexts, thus challenging the use of the term "religion" as objective and universal. From an ethical point of view, the deployment of this particular category as a universal one has been instrumental in both construing inequal relations in

colonial and postcolonial contexts and securing epistemological (and therefore, as Foucault would put it, power-related) boundaries. We will explore in more detail these critiques.

1.7.1 Genealogy of the term and uses of "religion"

As already anticipated, the attempt to frame religion as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon separated from politics or other dimension of human behavior is part of the historical development of modern, liberal nation state in Europe and US. Before that, the use of the term "religion" reflected quite different conceptualizations which developed historically accordingly to contexts.

In ancient Rome the Latin term *religio* referred more to social obligations, including cultic observance to gods, but also civic oaths and family rituals. In early Christianity, the Church Fathers used this term in a variety of meanings, and the only author who dealt with it extensively was Augustine of Hippo (354-430) in his *De vera religione* (389-90). Here he understood it as "worship", in the sense of act to render praise, and considered as the authentic worship the one directed to God, in contrast to other entities. However, he also acknowledged the normal Latin usage comprehensive of various social obligations (Canavaugh 2009: 62-4).

In Middle Ages *religio*, on one hand, still retains its sense of 'binding' or 'duty'. It was used in fact with reference to monastic or similar rules, and was thus also as a way to distinguish the monastic orders, the *religious* ones, from the 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 (65-7).

In none of these ancient and medieval usages Canavaugh is able to individuate *religio* as a universal genus of which Christianity is a mere local kind. Indeed, this kind of idea would have undermined the very pretension of Christianity to be the universal truth producer. Similarly, other characteristics of the modern idea of religion, e.g. being a system of proposition or being primarily a matter of individual interiority, are hard to attest (68).

C. Smith traces the first seeds of a universal conception of religion in the Renaissance Platonist Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) who, in his *De Christiana Religione* (1474), wrote that *religio* was "religiousness" i.e. a divinely infuse faculty in all men to perceive and worship God. He used *christiana religio* to indicate when this faculty/instinct is directed to Christ and therefore is nearest to the (platonic) ideal of worship of God (C. Smith 1963: 34-5). In a similar vein, Canavaugh individuates shift towards universalization and interiorization of the concept of religion 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 subsequently reaffirmed in protestant reformer such as Zwingli (1484-1531) and, above all, Calvin (1509-1564). The latter wrote in 1536 the influential catechism *Christiane Religionis Institutio*, to which Smith traces also the popularization of the phrase "*Christiana religio*", identified by Calvin as the subjective disposition, or *pietas*, that every good and true Christian should nurture (C. Smith 1963: 35-7). This emphasis on the inner devotion of the individual is observable in the increasing use, in protestant conceptualizations, of the term "faith" (Z. 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 various confessions had to find a way to express and differentiate themselves from each other, for polemical purposes, in clearly and succinctly ways. Therefore, through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we have a transition in which religions came to be founded *on factual statements/system of ideas and belief.* This is the case, for example of Edward Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648), who attempted to reach a concord among all known religions - that were increasingly numerous within and outside Europe - by identifying the five essential beliefs of *religion as such*, which can be instinctively apprehended by a natural faculty of the mind (Canavaugh: 2009: 74-6).

In Herbert one can recognize 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 arrival of information outside Europe. As "Natural religion" stressed further the idea of universality and innateness, differences were understood as a form of degeneration from a common point of departure, being it God, morality, rationality or feeling (cfr. Z. Smith 1998: 272-3).

Of course, in these intellectual developments also the conceptions of what was understood as religion outside European borders were included. Generally, from the seventeenth to the end of eighteenth century, there has been a lasting use of dividing religious practices (along with regions of the world) 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 than was not the Perfect Being specified by Christian authorities (Masuzawa 2005: 47-51). Indeed, these works, drawing from voyage observations and travel journals, were intended to be not only exotic literary distractions, or *ante-litteram* attempts of comparison between religions. As 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* (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, through which various narratives and data could be framed (Fitzgerald 2007: 218-9). 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 new conceptualization of religion as systems of beliefs, rather than as practices typical of certain 'nations' or 'tribes'. Also, there was a more sophisticated differentiation of the "heathens" in, e.g., Buddhist, Jainist, followers of the Vedas or the "Pooranas", 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, see also 64-7).

A point of departure from this situation is individuated by Masuzawa (2005: *passim*) in the nineteenth century in which, through developments in comparative theology, linguistics and the newly established science of religion, the old fourfold division of Christians, Jews, Mohammedans and heathens came to be replaced, by the early decades of the twentieth century, 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, including e.g. Daoism, Shintō, Baha'i, Confucianism. If this shift can be read as a progress towards inclusivism, the historical reconstruction of the ways in which Buddhism and Islam came to be recognized as "universal religions" - as in the influential definition of Dutch scholar Cornelius P. Tiele (1830-1902) (Z. Smith 1998: 279) - shows that, instead of being a neutral conceptual exercise, it was in fact part of a much broader discussion of the European identity and its relation to the rest of the world.

The case of Buddhism is telling, and relevant also for the overall argument of the present work. Before nineteenth century, everything that was later to be recognized as Buddhism was included in paganism, but later on, resemblances, links, and genealogical relations with seemingly different practices in Ceylon, Burma, China, Japan and so on came to the fore. More importantly, discoveries in Nepal of a textual corpus in Sanskrit made possible for the first philologists to discover - or to say it better, construe - the early Buddhism as a "system of metaphysical and social philosophy" which was assumed to have become subsequently corrupted by older superstitions in the land in which it expanded (Masuzawa 2005: 127-9). Two factors concurred in attributing to Buddhism the character of universality (up to that point, limited to Christianity): first, its being retraceable to an extraordinary yet historically real 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 forerunner of modern ideals of the individual against the divine privileges, and as an

example of a teaching which transcended ethnic or national boundaries as it expanded outside India. (137).

However, in this situation Christianity faced for the first time a hypothetical competitor, of older origins and possibly with more numerous faithful. Europeans enthusiast of Buddhism, like members of the Theosophical Society[13], started thinking, in opposition to academician, of Christianity as later derivation from an ancient esoteric wisdom to which Buddhism was much closer (cfr. Lopez 2008: 177-192). 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. The first came to be considered as the language of civilization, due to its grammar structure - especially the characteristic of "inflexion" - and to its being the progenitor of the language of Greece, considered the ancient cradle of modern thought and science (Masuzawa 2005:163-171). In this way, the newly discovered religion, Buddhism, was further associated with the ideals of universality, reason, individuality (i.e. the self-representation of Europe), thanks to its affiliation to the Indo-European family - often termed "Aryan" - through Sanskrit and Pāli.

At the same time, the Semitic family of languages 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 European past" (145). Before the discovery of language families, serious challenges to Christianity as the real embodiment of universality could come only from other monotheisms, which were nonetheless deprecated as old fossil of Christianity, like Judaism, or latter-day violent deviation, like Islam. This supremacy was undermined by a rival, Buddhism, which had Indo-European roots and was not even a monotheism, but a more abstract and philosophical religion, whereas Christianity's roots in Semitic language came out as problematic (186ff).

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.

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[13] The Theosophical Society, founded in 1875 and still existent today, albeit in different form after various developments, has been one of the most influential organizations in modern times for the modernist reception and the dissemination of eastern religious traditions. It has been inspired by the writings of one its co-founder, Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–91) a medium well- versed in the European esoteric *mileu*. Theosophical Society's doctrine, drawing from sources ranging from Egypt to the east Asia, presented itself as the fundamental, ancient and universal secret tradition of superior knowledge and wisdom, that should be revived, in the modern world, as an alternative to traditional Christianity and positivist science. See also below on chapter 4, esp. 4.3.2.

In this way, as Buddhism rose as a humanistic reform - much like Protestant reform was supposed to be - against the context of ethnic/national Brahmanism, so Christianity emerged out of ethnic/national Judaism (205). Masuzawa concludes:

> It now appears, then, that what should be called "uniquely universal" is not Christianity - a religion saddled with a complicated, compromised, and contested legacy - but instead, the Aryans. At the close of the nineteenth century, it seems, European people everywhere no longer felt the need to wonder why this should have been the case-no need to explain the intrinsic universalism of the Aryans or the inescapable national/ethnic/racial limitation of the Semites and, for that matter, of everyone else. It was as though, at that point in history, the recently established new world order, or European hegemony in the military, political, and economic spheres could be trusted to speak for itself. (206)

Whether or not Islam was a religion too, it remained a long-discussed controversy. In the end it came to be recognized as such by important scholar such as Tiele, probably due to similarities with Christianity, such as having a founder figure and having expanded in multiple regions. However, its universalistic intentions were explained partly on the fact that Muhammed drawn considerably from Jewish and Christian sources, partly from the Arabs' own transnational political ambition (205).

1.7.2. The twin birth of the 'religious' and the 'secular'

Coherently with a genealogy of historical metamorphoses of the concept of religion, scholars are skeptical of the neutrality and feasibility of adopting such concept outside the boundaries of modern western societies. In fact, they further argue that the very separation between "religion" and something that is "not-religion" - i.e. the precondition for a the study of an object (religion) from an outsider position (non-religion) - is peculiar to a certain historical context and it has been rhetorically construed out of instrumental reasons, in order to establish "religion" and "not-religion" (notably politics) as natural, intuitive and commonsensical entities.

Reconnecting with what discussed in the previous section, it must be added that, in medieval times, Christianity differed greatly from what, in modern times, is thought to be "religion". Far from being an essentially distinct form of culture, or mode of reasoning and feeling, it functioned as an authorizing discourse embracing a vast domain of practices (and not only "belief"), power- and violence-related practices included. Though the roles and boundaries between actors were contested, Christianity was not (cfr. Asad 1993: *passim*).

Even in reformation times, nor Luther or Calvin believed in a state in the modern sense as being essentially separate from a religion understood as Christian truth. For many decades afterwards, at least till the end of the seventeenth century, the "civil" dimension, even if state and church were clearly identifiable, did not have the nuance of the modern "secular". One example is what Fitzgerald calls the "encompassing religion" in the case of England. In his analysis of the language of British historical documents from the fifteenth to the late seventeenth century, Fitzgerald argues that what retrospectively we may call "politics" were identifiable as an organic, 'sacred' or 'ritual' order in that it encompassed the whole society with a bodily metaphor: the monarch as the heart, his advisors as the head, soldiers as the arms, laborers as the feet. 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: ch. 5, 6 and 8).

Many scholars (Fitzgerald 2017:450ff, Canavaugh 2009:78ff, Nongbri 2013:101ff) agree in seeing a first turning point towards a separation between religious and secular domains, in the terms of the privatization of the former, 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 idea of "church", which is to be considered, in contrast to the medieval church, as a "voluntary *[libera]* Society of Men, joining themselves together of their own accord" (Locke 1689: 6 cit. in Nongbri 2013:102).

Apart from Locke, Fitzgerald takes into consideration, as seminal authors in the construction of religion as a separate domain, Anglican bishop Benjamin Hoadly (1676-1761) and William Penn (1644-1718), member of Quakers, founder of Pennsylvania and writer of early liberal constitutions. Penn too, in his writings on tolerance, employs an inner/outer dichotomization, opposing religion to civil society, other-worldly salvation to this-worldly governance, the private realm of the soul and conscience to the public realm of law and the magistrate. It is said that Penn's ideas have inspired bishop Hoadly when he held an influent sermon in front of the king at the Royal Chapel at St. James's in 1717, focused on an exegesis of Saint John 18:36, ''Jesus answered, My Kingdom is not of this World". Here Hoadly equates "religion" with the Kingdom of Christ, and since such Kingdom regards salvation or punishment in the world to come and the conscience of individuals, "External religion" - i.e. material manifestation such as superstitious ritualism of Catholics and pagans alike - is not true religion. Therefore, no temporal laws apply to this inner and other-worldly kingdom, whose sole legislator is Christ (Fitzgerald 2007: 269-73).

At this point is relevant to note, as Martin (2009) does, 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, 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 denomination 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 Eucharist), whereas 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 the rest of the continent, did not flip from the above mentioned 'encompassing religion', to embracing religious toleration because of a growing enlightened *mileu* exemplified by Locke. Instead, it is wise, from a historical 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, only minority denominations (such as Quakers) actually favored the disestablishment of religion in principle. It is true that the Quakers' view about the defense of religious conscience from the interference of the civil magistrate was a radical idea for those times, but it was grounded on the pre-existent doctrine of "divine inward revelation", which was believed to be authoritative both in front of the reason and even scripture (*ib.*). It has to be remembered also that Penn, founder of Pennsylvania, wanted to establish a Quaker colony.

According to historians, Penn, Locke and Hoadly were influential thinkers whose often cited ideas, coming from 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 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. The deism professed by many founding fathers, i.e. the idea of the existence of rational and natural laws and principles created by a transcendent and not-intervening divinity, facilitated an ideological reversal by which the aura of sacredness (i.e. untouchability) of the private sphere was reflected also to the secular-political realm, as can be seen in the reverence to the founding fathers and to the Constitution (Fitzgerald 2007: 275-99).

Other scholars investigated the mutual interdependence of concepts such as "sacred" and the "secular". 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.

In post-reformation times, the development of Higher Biblical Criticism (focused on Bible's composition and history), produced a split. On one hand, from this type of exegesis it also developed a 'History' (including ecclesiastical history) dependent on skeptical enquiry in pursuit of authenticity, which positioned itself in the secular epistemological domain. On the other hand, this exegesis pursued a way of reading the scripture as 'statements' issued form supernatural being, requiring assent from believer, that is, requiring faith not as a *virtue*, but primary as an *epistemological faculty*. This, according to Asad, was a very different stance from medieval times, when scriptures were engaged through *ritual hearing*, accompanied by the disciplining of all other bodily senses.

The epistemological contrast between the two approaches (i.e. faith *vs* skepticism) to the Bible was resolved appealing to a 'mythical reading' of scriptures, in the sense that they were 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. For the latter, there were still the divine inspiration at work. For the former, prophets and apostles have been just influential poets.

This concept of inspiration, along with the developing objectification of the physiological body in medicine, and the growing ethnological information about shamans in anthropology, became further naturalized/de-religionized. However, what Asad wants to point out is that this did not affect the idea of myth. Thus, in contemporary (20th century onwards) writers such as T. Elliot, the myth is employed as an explicit fictional ground for secular values that are sensed to be ultimately without foundations. Similarly, Asad takes into consideration also contemporary political theorists who 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 the persuasive myth of redemption of the world by liberal values, which is similar to Christian idea of redemption of the world.

1.7.3. Religion, orientalism and colonialism

The above-mentioned discourses contributing to the construction of the idea of religion as an essentially distinct domain are deemed by scholars not only functional in 'domestic' terms, but - perhaps more importantly - they have also greatly contributed to the formation of what Said (1978) has termed as "Orientalist discourse" and that functioned as cultural legitimation of the colonial

aggression and political supremacy of Europe and North America. Manzalaoui (1980: 838) has individuated some core theses of Said 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 of social change. The reason is that, differently from people of the 'West' which are considered individualistic, equipped with rational and technological tools and thus capable of creating history, the 'others' are sunk in conformity and concerned only with religious or spiritual matters.

From nineteenth century onwards, and in various ways, the birth and first developments 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 (as was considered in those times) 'fading' religion; on the other we have anthropology, which was born to study the others (i.e. the colonized), and which employed in its first decades an evolutionary paradigm, distinguishing between "primitive" or civilized/advanced religion. The study of religion\s has been enforcing further the "othering" of the colonized people by focusing mainly on the past and textual basis of what only in modernity has been labelled, in those regions, as religion. Often modern and colonial times have been neglected in these analysis, or just little space have been allocated to highlight the "messiness" of contemporary religions in respect to their "traditional times" (Nye 2019:13-4).

In Fitzgerald's view (2007: ch. 4 and *passim*), there is a connection between the above sketched genealogy of religion - and its twin, secularity - and the deployment of these concepts in colonial context, a link grounded in the fundamental binary logic of "Civility and Barbarity". According to him, first 'Civility' was represented by Christianity versus the 'Barbarity' of the heathens, afterwards it was Protestantism contrasted with the pagan-like rituals of Catholicism, and finally 'Civility' was embodied, in the 'West', by liberal secular states in which religion was confined to the private sphere, whereas the 'Rest' was still entangled in barbarous mixture of religion and politics.

Mandair calls these deployments in colonial contexts "discourses of religion-making" (Mandair 2016, Dressler and Mandair 2011). These followed a more or less recognizable pattern: prior to conquers, European explorers (see above 1.7.1) routinely reported how local people's custom were mere idolatry, i.e. they had not religion because their devotion was directed to false gods. As such, they were less than human, and this legitimated their invasion. However, once such population were

conquered, nineteenth century empire states, in a logic of governability, disciplined various things (cultures, social groups, symbols, language) as pertaining to various categories, among which "religious" and "secular" were prominent, and, most importantly, now understood as *universal*.

In this way, local people's "religion" was construed on the basis of a prototypical Christian notion of religion, with the following characteristics*:*1) *universality and distinctiveness*, that is, all societies have one or more "religions" which constitute particular examples of a common genus "Religion" and can be clearly distinguished by other cultural phenomena such as "science," "politics," "economics," and so on. 2) *Creedal emphasis*: all religions, especially the most 'evolved' ones, are to be understood primarily as a set of well defined "beliefs" or "propositions", expressing certain truth claims, towards which members are expected to "have faith in". 3) *Scripturalism*: the above-mentioned set of beliefs are supposed to be inscribed in a closed canon of sacred texts which are considered primarily for their cognitive value (instead 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" (King 2011: 49).

This prototype helped to bring cultures in a "taxonomic system of equivalence" (Mandair 2016:186) that permitted, on one hand, homogeneity, in the sense that the sharing of "religiosity" was seen as a point of similarity and therefore a possibility of comprehension. 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, which is the offshoot of (Protestant) Christianity.

Since I will delve more in detail in concrete case concerning Asian religions in chapter 4th , I will limit myself here to just a few examples and remarks.

Chidester (1996) in his investigation of the uses of "religion" towards southern Africa natives such as Khoikhoi (better known as "Hottentots"), Xhosa and Zulu, shows how the treatment of the 'religiosity' of these people changed accordingly to power relations with settlers. He argues that as long as a particular African community posed a military threat or obstacle to European settlers, its members were regarded as people without religion. Such "assertion that the indigenous people of the region lacked religion negated their full humanity and thereby contributed to the colonial representations of southern Africa as an empty, open space for colonization" (87). Once the colonizers' control was secured, however, attributing religion to indigenous peoples was both a way of denying them political subjectivity and a way of inserting their cultures into a comparative framework. Among various theories deployed, observers and missionaries often resorted to a kind of genealogical analysis, according to which these communities had Abrahamic origins, e.g. the Hottentots were descendent from ancient Hebrews, or the Xhosa's religion, in a similar vein, was

thought having Arab roots. Other interpretations took place, but the common theme in all of them was the characterization of those culture as primitive, "childish", degenerated from a supposed pure origin, stubbornly resistant to conversion, etc., and therefore in need of forced civilization (and Christianization).

However, in addition to this kind of narrative about the relations between colonized and colonizer, attention must be directed also to the processes of "inner colonization" set forward by the native elites, who often had been educated through Euro-American standards. In the case of India, Torri (2002) underlines how the choice of interlocutors by administrator and missionaries has been pivotal in the orientalist creation of Hinduism. Such collaborators belonged indeed to Brahmanical castes, and to a lesser extent, Muslim law-doctors. That is, they were conservative religious specialists dealing mainly with elites-written texts. Their views differed from previous native political elites of the Mughal Empire, who generally held pluralistic positions concerning the religious landscape and were aware of mutual influences traditions exerted on each other. Obviously, these elites could not have been selected as possible collaborators by British officials, i.e. the invaders. Missionaries and scholars too privileged, as sources of information concerning Indian religion, specialists who would fit into their prototypical idea of locating the 'essence' of religion in ancient texts and their idea of a distinct separation between Islam and the 'religion' of India. Furthermore, it is known that the British Empire sought to create a class of Anglicized local people, "Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macauley: 1835 cit. in King 1999: 89) as intermediaries between governors and governed. Mandair points to the fact that in the creation of such ruling class the paradigm adopted was "monotheism-monolinguism". That is, vernacular schools were established in which Hindi was taught to Hindus and Urdu to Muslims. He argues that 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).

I have mentioned before the expression "map is not territory" (Z. Smith 1978, p. 309), but in the case of colonial entanglements of the study of religion\s, King observes how "maps may not be territory, but through colonialism, European cognitive maps have reconfigured the very territory that they are purported to represent" (2011: 45). This is especially true for the processes of inner colonization and self-orientalism brought about by elites. Processes which, in the case of India, but not dissimilar to China, Sri Lanka or Japan, were enabling factors of later religious and secular nationalist movements of independence 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, Mabbett, Roy, Brittlebank and Bowles 2012: 262). This is to say that even after the end of

political colonialism, the relationship between the cultures of the "West" and those of the "Rest" is still framed in hegemony and subalternity, as the imagination and thinking of natives keep employing Euro-American modern categories and shape accordingly their identities.

Therefore, if orientalist discourses pictured 'Eastern' people as incapable of going beyond the religious dimension and embracing modern secularism, natives then answered by employing modernist and nationalist religious policies. That is, they discriminated between "religions" and "superstitions", 'rationalized' their own religious practices by focusing on 'inner' dimension, at the expenses of outer manifestations, and, *last but not least*, they conceptualized and portrayed their traditions as spiritual remedies for a materialistic 'West'. In doing so, native elites were also, consciously or not, exploiting another type of orientalism discourse, the affirmative one. Especially in regard to 'Eastern' religions, this kind of discourse portrayed them as repositories of ancient wisdom Europeans may have forgotten, similarly to what we already seen in the case of Buddhism (see above 1.7.1). At any rate, both cases of affirmative orientalism from outside or self-promoting reforms from inside were inevitably still framed by modern European idea of religion and related concepts (I will elaborate more on this in chapter 4th).

1.7.4. Critiques of essentialism and new research agenda for the study of religion\s

The above discussed issues represent the most frequently adduced basis upon which several scholars build up critical arguments and skepticism concerning the intuitive and non-problematic use of "religion" as universal entity. Or, even if employed as abstract and arbitrary category, criticism is still directed especially to those conceptualizations of "religion" as consisting, in its essential 'core', as a private, inner, 'experiential' relation with 'god', the 'unconditioned' or any other kind of transcendent entity. Such conceptualizations generally pose, as auxiliary elements to this experiential 'core', doctrines and myths about this transcendent entity and its action to the world. Such doctrines are supposed to 'express' how the individual relationship faithful-god should be structured, manly through inner disposition such as well-defined beliefs or, conversely, peculiar and ineffable mystical experience defying rational explanation. These 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 characterized by religious nature are explicitly or implicitly conceived as separated or even contrasted with society, science, politics, and all that is deemed pertaining to the 'secular'.

In these regards, phenomenology of religion is particularly blamed for having nurtured such views. I have already briefly mentioned above (1.2) how phenomenology of religion was ultimately

committed to discover an universal experience of faith behind all the particular manifestation of religions. It must be said that, in their employment of Husserl methodology, the first phenomenologists ideally wanted to limit the potentially distorting influences of one's own presupposition. On one hand, they wanted, e.g. to avoid hierarchical judgment of the value of a religion on the basis of the similarities or not to Christianity, like evolutionary anthropologists or missionaries did. On the other hand, the first phenomenologists felt compelled to contrast the reduction of religion to other factors like society (Durhkeim), unconscious (Freud) or material conditions (Marx) brought about by the raising social sciences (see Cox: 2006 ch. 2). However, this ultimately led to paradoxical results. As Flood (1999: 104-108) 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 study of 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 [...] who can, through objectification, have access to a truth external to any particular historical and cultural standpoint" (108). By doing this, phenomenologists introduced more subtle bias: they postulated a universal human experience at the core of all religion, which could, moreover, 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 almost all 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. Indeed, we have already seen (1.3, 1.7.1 and 1.7.2) how theological thought was entangled with the development of phenomenology and how the emphasis of the inner sphere as the natural dimension of all religions developed throughout Christian modern thought. Weibe (1999: 141ff) accuses several past and contemporary exponents of the academic study of religion\s of "failure of nerve" for not having resisted the pressure of ecumenical theological thinking, that is, for positing the existence of some sort of ultimate, hidden and mysterious reality, ontologically independent, to which all religious discourses ultimately focus on. If one is to say something about this ultimate entity to which religions point to, and which is supposedly ungraspable by normal scientific methods, this is a matter of emphatic (that is, religious) understanding typical of phenomenology. The *a priori* acceptance of such reality, as Weibe further points out (148), precludes other causal explanations or any other kind of detached investigation. 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, see also Strenski 2015:142-55). Fitzgerald (2000) push

this critique even further, arguing that the very use of the category of "religion" itself is inherently theological, since it entails that a set of social and cultural phenomena can be regrouped and qualified as religion by virtue of a *sui generis* criterion. However, such criterion, variously identified - due to the influence of phenomenology - with 'transcendental terms' such as the sacred, the numinous, the wholly other, etc., belongs ultimately to a modern protestant conceptualization of religion as essentially inner, emotional experience of the relation with God, and for this reason essentially different from the 'outer' mundane realm (3-98).

Apart from the accusation of smuggling theology and therefore impeding an objective, detached investigation of religion, the essentialist perspective is further disapproved from the point of view of political and social critique. Cox (2006: 226-7) observes that there is a humanistic tendency running through the writings of key phenomenologists which, notwithstanding the practices of suspension of judgments or *epochè,* pushes them to think of their works, especially in the case of Eliade, as engendering a sense of meaning of life, which is lacking in the modern word deprived of a contact with the sacred. However, due to this 'spiritualizing' of religion and the assertion that there is a common (and ultimately 'good') essence in all religions, they distanced themselves from issues concerning religion and society, politics, power and violence, dimensions which are thus deemed as 'degeneration' from the 'real' religion. One of the foremost critics in this sense is McCoutcheon (2001). According to him, religions has been construed as an "independent variable occupying the untainted realm of pure and private moral insight that is opposed to, and the salvation of, the messy public worlds of politics and economies" (131-2), a move that basically reduces the scholar to the translator of the point of view of the insider, without any possibility of critical analysis and of unveiling of power relations. This critique does not apply only to the so-called religious systems, which are "perhaps the pre-eminent site for creating social continuity amidst the discontinuities of historical existence" (177) and thus impossible to be conceived as social and political autonomous realms, but applies especially to the power relations entangled in the historical construction of the twin spheres of "religion" and the "secular", which we have already encountered (1.7.2 and 1.7.3) in the case of colonialism or in the modern creation of the private sphere.

Closely related to these issues is the problem of the paradigm of "world religion", whose first delineation as concept, we have seen (1.7.1), was not a neutral process. The world religion paradigm concurs to the rhetoric of universality of religion as natural entity in that it represents religious traditions (Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.) as discrete systems, whose outer boundaries as well as 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 more or less equated with each other in

their focus on the relation with theology-laden idea such as the "transcended", the "divine", the "sacred" and so on (see Owen 2011, Cotter and Robertson 2016). In this way, world religions are seen as 'actors' existing alongside each other, sometimes in competition for the occupation of a common public space, other times engaging in dialogue, other times again battling with each other over the monopoly of 'Truth'. However, 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 the so-called world-religions. This image of supposed homogeneity ultimately refers, and *limits* the representation of a given tradition, to the (often male) elites' views and their scriptural practices. Secondly, by assuming the naturality of this paradigm, the historical discursive construction and the deployment of a prototypical notion of religion discussed in the previous sections are hided. 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 2016: 256-7).

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 to avoid the naivete of the old comparativism. As exponent of the first strand we can cite Fitzgerald, who initially (2000) called for a dismissal of the use of the term "religion" and instead promoted the investigation of phenomena utilizing separated categories of "salvation", "ritual" and "politics", under the rubric of expanded cultural studies. Lately (2017) his proposal of "critical religion" pushes the focus forward the critical and historical deconstruction of the very idea of religion and other related categories. As such, since for him the concept of religion is a modern invention, bringing into critical light this and correlated categories that unconsciously determines our understanding is tantamount to a critique of modern consciousness itself. In a similar vein, McCoutcheon (see for example 2018) argues that the study of religion\s should better focus on investigating conditions for the emergence and use of the category of "religion". For example, by 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. Among outsiders McCoutcheon includes also - or especially- the scholars and their stakes into the preservation of the category of religion.

Differently from this kind of dismissal of the very idea of religion and the reframing of the discipline into critical analysis of discursive practices, King (1999: 201ff, 2005: 287 and 2017: 16-8)

still endorses the application of the term "religion", insofar 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 opens the "possibility, indeed for such theorists the necessity, of exploring alternative ways of understanding and representing human diversity" (2009: 287). He reflects on the fact that, even in its beginning, the study of religion\s has been always concerned, apart from the clarification of the object "religion", with the goal of "understanding 'ourselves' through a comparative analysis of the 'others'" (2017: 17), as it was the case of Durkheim, drawn to study religion by the problem of modern anomie. Such role of the comparative study of religion\s as a forum for cross-cultural discussion, civilizations analysis, and cultural critique can be further enhanced by the awareness of the political nature of knowledge itself, and, once the homogenizing/ appropriating categories are displaced, by the recourse to "*historical* and *non-Western* contexts since these serve as the primary sites of *difference* from which one may view dominant Western models of modernity in their historical and cultural specificity" (*ib.*).

1.8 Methodology

Especially in relation to the demise of phenomenology as the main theory and method to investigate the supposed *sui generis* phenomenon of religion, the study of religion\s increasingly acknowledged the multidimensional nature of its subject matter. Consequently, it refined its methods of research in order to maintain scientific standards and intersubjective verifiability. Due to its multifaced object and its sensitiveness to the typologies of theories it is engaged with, there is not any single methods unique to the study of religion\s - even if, in past, the privileged one has been the historical or philological-historical. The nature of the sources - written, oral, material - and the variety of theories available do require various methods, from linguistic analysis, to fieldwork, to discourse analysis, even experiments (especially in the case of cognitive sciences-based approaches) and so on, which will be useless to review here (see on this topic Stausberg and Engler 2011). However, Alberts (2007: 43ff) individuates a cluster of mutually related 'meta-methods' which is useful to address briefly as the basic research procedures widely used (not exclusively) in the study of religion\s. They are the following: *understanding*, *description*, *comparison*, *explanation*, *classification* and *contextualization*.

Among these meta-methods, Stausberg (2011) attributes particular importance to *comparison*. Indeed, the study of religion\s historically was born as a comparative science, since one of its founding fathers, Max Müller, wanted to build up the comparative study of religion\s on the same foundation

of the recent comparative study of languages. His aim was to reach a scientific and genetic classification of the various religious traditions. At any rate, the point here is that comparison can be conceived both as particular method in itself and as a *modus operandi* intrinsic to almost any other research design in the study of religion\s (and beyond), and it is logically connected with the other meta-methods, in particular *classification*.

Concerning *classification*, it must be bear in mind that the creation of analytical-theoretical categories by which classifying data - i.e. grouping for structural similarities - is inevitably based on native concepts with a specific history or background, which need to be abstracted and generalized. This is the case of the famous Weberian ideal types (Weber [1904] 2011: 90ff), that is, the selection and exaggeration of certain elements deemed relevant by the observers under which regrouping and connecting discrete phenomena. The next logical step, i.e. to assess the validity/range of use of a certain category, implies that the relevant phenomena must be *compared* in term of similarity and differences with the said category. Such operation may well result in an undercutting of a false generalization previously taken for granted (i.e. the centrality of the category of belief in a given religious tradition) and call for better categories. In other words, *comparison* is essential in the constant retooling of modes of *classification*, in which categories must be changed accordingly with data materials (bottom-up) with which then reviewing the source materials with changed eyes (top-down) (Stausberg 2011: 28-30, Alberts 2007: 45).

Turning to *contextualization*, this is somehow linked with a certain skepticism towards comparison, in connection to the rejection of phenomenology. This is because the act of comparison implies certain issues of generalization and reduction that not only have been considered of poor scientific value but can (and indeed have) lead also to ideological and political problems. For example, there is the issue of supposed neutrality of the ground of which comparison is carried out, or the way in which differences have been managed during comparison, e.g. creating hierarchy or subsuming/minimizing difference under a supposed universal idea of religion (Paden 2005: 209-212, 216-218). In other words, certain broad comparative approaches have been charged with the accuse of neglecting the high inner complexity of the single traditions and importance of the various particular contexts, which nowadays require high-specialization (e.g. philological-linguistic) in a certain area or religious traditions. Each tradition in itself shows different characteristics and changes accordingly to different historical and socio-cultural contexts (e.g. theological debates in early Christianity *vs* contemporary evangelical preaching in Brasilian favelas). In addition, since religions are not completely separated domains from other societal spheres or (sub)systems, also considering how they interacts and merge boundaries with economy (see e.g. Koch 2016), law (Schontal 2016), environmental issues (Ivakhiv 2016), science (Vollmer and Von Stuckrad 2016), medicine (Klassen 2016), sport (Cusak 2016) and

so on, is an important contextualization that shades light on the complexity of the matter. Another relevant challenge to comparison, concerning the issue of contextualization, is the critique to the concept of religion itself which, as we have already seen (1.7.1), is inextricably tied to certain historical and geographical frames and its transfer in *other contexts* has been, and still is, very problematic.

For Stausberg (2011: 28-9) the main fault of phenomenological comparativism was to strive for a cross-religious synthesis rather than a reflection over similarities and differences, overemphasizing likeness at the expenses of heterogeneity. This ended up engendering an unduly critique to a basic intellectual operation that, as already noted, is inherent to other operations. Indeed, comparison not only takes place in broad, sweeping generalization, but also in analysis of specific, confined case-study on a single particular religion. Here the researcher, in order to convey as best as possible foreign concepts, has to *compare* them with his/her own conceptual repertoire, in order to choose the most appropriate native (to the researcher) equivalent. Similarly, in order to assess the complexity of a given religion, also a *comparison* between and within the various contexts related to that religion has to be carried out. 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 terms "*religio*" was used in different periods.

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Of course, comparison as a metamethod in itself, cannot ignore the above-mentioned challenges, as Paden's summary of recent comparativism shows (Paden 2005: 218-24), nor should be completely dismissed as an academic endeavor. Indeed, comparison address an important presupposition at the base of the study of religion\s, that is, the sharing of a common human nature. Humans do not only eat, sleep and reproduce, but also

> … create societies that form relationships and bonds, maintain moral order and codes of behavior, socialize the young, pass on examples of ancestral tradition, distinguish between insiders and outsiders, set and defend boundaries, perform periodic rites, endow objects and persons with special prestige and authority, punish transgressions, experiment with alternative forms of consciousness, recite sacred histories and genealogies, interpret events and objects, form communicative systems with culturally postulated immaterial beings, classify the universe, and fashion their own worlds of time, space, language, and obligation. In these and many other ways, all human societies build and maintain world-environments. (220)

All these common behaviors can be seen as the 'construction blocks' by which cultures build up such vast variety of forms of life, that makes us observe that, rather paradoxically, it is an "universal feature of human life to build specific worlds for specific, different environments" (221).

Given the critical role, for the good and the bad, played by comparativism in the field (see also Stroumsa 2018), it is worth dwelling on methodological discussion about it and show further logic connections with the other meta-methods discussed in this section. Freiberger (2018b) provides some useful insights in order to make the comparison process more transparent and controllable. He identifies four key aspects of comparison: *goals*, *modes*, *scales* and *scopes*; and six (potential) operations: *selection*, *description*, *juxtaposition*, *redescription*, *rectification* and *theory formation*.

Concerning *goals*, comparison may pursue various ends. It could aim to a better understanding of a certain item – be it one with evident empirical grounding, such a text, or a more theoretical construct such as "fundamentalism" – through heuristic juxtaposition with another one. From a more generical perspective, comparison may instead focus on juxtaposing various items in order to create or refine categories. For example, a comparative study between Hindu and Christian fundamentalism may be focused more on understanding better the latter, i.e. by discovering hidden spots or new questions through comparison with a similar item. This correspond also to a certain *mode* of comparison, i.e. the "*illuminative*" one, which is asymmetrical in its instrumental use of the second term (or additional ones) of comparison. The same study may instead focus more on a better definition of the very category of "fundamentalism". This symmetrical examination, often of various 'species' from an individual given 'genus', is the mode called "*taxonomic*" (4-5).

The key aspects *scales* and *scopes* refer to the degree to which a study zooms in on the comparands, and the distance between them. These aspects are important to avoid unduly comparison, to set reasonable research aims and to better frame the comparands. Attention to the issue of *scale* should avoid confusing micro-level with macro-levels, and the consequent risk of essentializing certain particular aspects as essential or general ones. For example, comparing Daoism with another tradition considering only early texts such as the *Daodejing* or the *Zhuangzi*.[14] Consideration of the *scope* help us to reflect on whether we put our comparison in a *contextual*, *cross-cultural* or *transhistorical* frame. In the first we expect our comparands to share the same context, so borrowings and dependency should be expected, which is not the case in the second frame. The *transhistorical* frame implies in fact comparison across times and always appears in conjunction with one of the other two: if we compare modern and pre-modern Japanese Buddhism, then the scope is *contextual* but *transhistorical*, if we compare Asian tantrism and esotericism with European occultism, then we are employing both *cross-cultural* and *transhistorical frames*. It should be noted that these scopes are heuristic and not clear-cut. From a perspective of the so-called "entangled history", the contextual frame may potentially include the whole global history (14).

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[14] On the reasons why this has occurred and may well occur in poorly considered comparisons, see *infra* 4.3.

Concerning the operations of comparison, *selection* is arguably the most critical. It entails not only the choice of the two or more comparands, but more importantly of the *tertium comparationis*, i.e. the "point or question *with regard to which* they are compared" (8), which is highly relevant and related to the research goal. An insightful choice of the *tertium* is what may put two seemingly incomparable traditions 'on the surface' in a condition of sharing interesting common features worth investigating, like exorcistic practices one may found in Christianity, in Buddhism and Daoism (cfr. Paden 2005: 218-24). On one side, we should note that the very assertion that two items deserve to be compared implies that a certain degree of comparison, with its more or less defined *tertium*, have been already and implicitly carried out (cfr. also Freiberger 2018a). Therefore, ensuring transparency in this operation is highly important. On the other side, in relation to the consideration of 'common human nature', 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 in fact broad comparison without downgrading the cultural specifics and differences. 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 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 borders among phenomena (cfr. 223-4).

This is the reason for the need of the operation of *description* (as sub-operation within comparison), that has to be carried in two ways. First, by locating the item in its historical, social and cultural context, individuating its local relevance. This is related also to the meta-method of *contextualization* above cited, but not limited to it. In fact, in a comparison one should also describe the relevance of comparands for the scholarly argument and purposes of the study at issue. This means that the description of the comparands is informed also by the fact that they will be compared, and attention is needed not to overemphasize or essentialize those traits we are interested in, thus misrepresenting the complexities of the comparands (Freiberger 2018b: 9-10).

Juxtaposition is, ultimately, the pivotal operation, as it consists of observing and analyzing the two comparands at the light of the *tertium comparationis*. It goes without saying that comparison cannot aim only at describing commonalities but must identify also differences, especially when particularities have to be highlighted. 'Common factor' or patterns discovered are more hypotheses to be further explored, than facts to be taken for granted, taking into consideration also the complexities

of each case and not neglecting the variety of contexts (Paden 2005: 218). It is, however, highly dependent on the research goal and therefore it is the most individual act for each study (Freiberger 2018b:10).

While these first three operations are inherent in any instance of comparison, the following three may represent the outcomes of comparison. One of them is *redescription*, i.e. the fact that, having gained new insights through comparison, we may update our understanding of one or more comparands. This is the outcome expected from comparison in the *illuminative mode*. Similarly, the operation of *rectification* entails the updating of the categories in which the comparands have been juxtaposed. This is the expected outcome in the *taxonomical mode* and corresponds also to the meta-method of *classification* above cited. The rectification of categories is in itself an act of theorizing, since these latter are the structural knots in every theory. *Rectification* may even lead to the creation of new categories, which suggests that an outcome of comparison, albeit ambitious, may ultimately be a better theoretical understanding of religion. As a new mode of comprehension for a phenomenon is offered, this could be an additional building block in *theory formation*.

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Turning our attention to the issues of *understanding* and *explanation*, these two terms have long been framed in a mutually exclusive manner, coupling the former with natural sciences and the latter with the humanities/social sciences. However, this dichotomy is nowadays hardly feasible (see e.g. useful sketch in Stueber 2012: 9-13) and, accordingly, epistemological discussions concerning the study of religion\s (e.g. Jensen J. 2011) feature both elements.

Understanding in our context is better to be named as *interpretation*, in a sense of an act of grasping a set of signs (texts, images, actions, behaviors...) in a *meaningful* way. The methods or principles governing such acts are what is called "hermeneutics", which is one of most basic 'tools' in the study of religion\s, because any other methods presuppose a degree of hermeneutical reflections (Flood 2016, Gilhus 2011). Among the main guidelines in hermeneutics we can cite the movements back and forth between the whole set of signs and the single element, so that 'totality' and 'parts' are mutually illuminating. Moreover, one should apply anything that can be known about *contextual* elements on the social, cultural, historical level. Indeed, we would make little sense of sacred narratives of origin of the world without reference e.g. to issues of power or societal configuration, such as those we can find, for example, in the Vedic myth of the dismemberment of the Primordial Man into the four main social classes. Similarly, 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 U.S. 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 in the fullest way possible the reasons why s/he acted in a certain way or how a text was composed and received (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 when it comes to religious texts, are 'obedient' and 'respectful' in the sense that they reproduce only the view of a dominant fraction as representative of the entire whole. In order to avoid this, it is suggested to employ a "hermeneutic of suspicion", instead of a "hermeneutic of faith"[15] (see e.g. Josselson 2004), asking whose interests are promoted, reading against the grain to discover possible hidden ideologies and bypass obvious or self-evident meanings in order to draw less visible - and less pleasant - interpretations. Instead, in an idealized and over-empathetic reading, the interpreter may fail to individuate, in Gadamer's terms, her/his prejudices and the contour of her/his "horizon of understanding", projecting uncritically naive assumptions over the "horizon of the text". This is the case, for example, of the uncritical assumption of the Protestant prototype of religion by those phenomenologists of religion, which has been challenged for this reason by later development in the study of religion\s (see above 1.7.4).

Explanation, for our purposes, can be defined as "disclosing how matters are causally connected or [as] 'making things clear'" (Jensen J. 2011a: 53, see 44-8 for the following discussion), and can be of various types. Intuitively, in the study of religion\s is fairly difficult to rely on the so called "deductive-nomological" explanation, commonly found in natural sciences. This explanation connects the *explicandum* to the *explanans* by means of necessity, often expressed in terms of 'natural law'. It should be noted, however, that we have seen instances of causal explanations in our previous discussion of cognitive sciences. Here religious behavior is explained on the basis of the inner working of the brain (see above 1.6). When natural laws are substituted by statistical frequency, these kinds of explanation of a given fact are referred as "inductive-statistical", and the logical connection between *explicandum* and *explanans* is given by our experience of what generally seems to be the case. If a Muslim person does not eat pork, we are inductively brought to explain this fact as a matter of religious prohibition. Such explanations are often used for their fair predictive force, even if they do not express necessary conditions. At any rate, the most commonly used and important types of explanation in human and social sciences are the so-called "positional or contextual" ones. In general terms, they aim to clarify *something unknown* by putting it in a context of *something know* and see how they 'hang together'. Instead of focusing on necessary causes of events, these explanations address the role, the place or the meaning of something in a context. Often various types of 'underlying mechanism' are invoked. For example, in attempts to explain the role of religion in contexts of conflict (as in the case e.g. of Pace 2004) religions are conceptualized as providers of symbolic representations

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[15] Terms named after Ricoeur's famous phrase "masters of suspicion" (Ricoeur 1965).

of collective identities or enemies. The explanatory process will thus look for those elements that should (re-)produce a meaningful account of what is to be explained. In other words, combining them in a certain 'narrative' structure. Such 'narration' is justified as explanatory strategy because it wants to clarify human actions as intentional and purposeful. Some of the most common explanations of this type, employed in the study of religion\s, are those clarifying a given religious phenomenon through the functions it assumes in a given context, e.g. explaining mythical stories as establishment of political power, with the caveat of not teleologically assuming that the only 'cause' or 'essence' of mythical narratives is to justify political power.

This widespread positional-contextual explanatory strategy shows that, especially in human and social sciences, *explanation* and *interpretation* should be seen as mutually implying operations. Interpretation commonly requires some explanatory procedures: if we are to make sense, e.g. of a certain social phenomenon like a ritual, explaining or clarifying the role of each ritual actors, within as well as beyond the ritual context, is a normal way to get a picture as meaningful as possible of that ritual. Similarly, if we need to explain something, we will need to look for data and other elements to lay out, justify or test our hypotheses; however, these data have also to be interpreted to fit coherently in our argument. Moreover, all these data are not mere brute 'facts' causally picked up from our experience, but we already *interpret* some facts as more useful 'data' than others because we have already a less or more explicit theory that tells *what counts as data or not*. For example, let us recall the above cited example of the (theory of) relation between religion and conflict explained in terms of religions as providers of symbolic representation of collective identities and enemies. To validate this hypothesis, we would select and investigate primarily those words and images of doctrines and rituals that may stir and amplify sentiments e.g. of national pride or fear and see how they work in politically tense situation, instead of, say, ideas of universal brotherhood in context of relaxed societal conditions.

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Finally, one of the most relevant tasks of the study of religion\s is the *description* of the vast variety of religious phenomena, in order to produce accounts of the various aspects of religion\s as comprehensive as possible. In this regard, it is important to briefly address two important dyads in the study of religion\s (and beyond), namely the insider-outsider and the emic-etic[16] couples. In a few words, the "outsider" is the scholarly observes of a religious phenomenon, whose actors are the "insiders". The emic perspective is applied when the outsider attempts to reproduce as faithfully as

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[16] 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-culturally notations devised by scholars in order to represent and compare these sounds.

possible insiders' behaviors, statements or their own descriptions of their tradition, whereas 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. classificatory terms such as "superhuman beings", "religious specialists", "sacred postulates" and so on (McCoutcheon 1999: 17). However, the emic and the etic perspectives should not be equated respectively with the point of view of the insider and the one of the outsider. Both etic and emic models are in reality 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 and Rota 2016: 327ff).

The existence between these two different perspectives has consequences for the insider-outsider relationship. It goes without saying that, if the study of religion\s limited itself to reporting the statements (oral, textual,) or expressions (artistic, performative, etc.) of insiders, it would be a quite insignificant endeavor. By applying the etic perspective, on the other hand, there can be various 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. 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 and Colleen 2010: 233). In other cases, the researcher is aware of parallels and comparisons which may play no part in the self-understanding of the insider, especially when the actual religious practices may contrast with official doctrinal positions. A classic example are the superhuman beings such as saints and angels, addressed in prayers or other rites of Catholicism. Creating a parallel between, say, the idea of city patron saints in Catholicism with the example of city gods[17] in Chinese popular religion may highlight some polytheistic features of Catholicism at odds with its self-understanding as monotheism. This brings also to the third TWB situation, that 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). For example, *zen* Buddhist practitioners in U.S. (see e.g. Seager 2000: 90-113) may feel at odds with, of even reject as non-Buddhist, the common customs of Japanese families of being registered under Zen temples (esp. Sōtō), but having nothing to do with meditative practice and relying on monks especially for funerary rites (Deal and Ruppert 2015, ch. 4 and 7). According to Pye, the TWB factor is likely to be low in the first phases of the description activity, called by him "elucidation", but basically consisting in the emic phase in which

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[17] *Chénghuángshén*, lit. "spirit of wall and moat". See Gossaert 2015: 6-19.

one focuses on the intentionality of the believer with less interference as possibly from the judgments of the researcher. In the next phase the TWB factors may increase a bit, as in the "characterization" – the application of scientific terminology - insiders may not agree. The TWB factor is likely to be high during the explanatory phase, when structural analysis, comparison and contextualization give an account of a given tradition which may not please an insider's point of view. Recalling the Buddhist funeral example, it is true that the 'religious reason' is the importance of the care of ancestors in Japan, but also economic and commercial reasons and contexts should be taken into consideration.

Given these chances of contrast between insiders and outsiders, it is important to note at this point 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 considered as the only authoritative view the one of the scholar able to *re-live* the subjective experience of the insider. The reason for this was that such experience was deemed the primary epistemic ground for gaining knowledge on religion. A move that not only is epistemologically dubious, as discussed above (1.6.4), but also at odds with the ideals of public and objective character of science, while resembling instead the various forms of esoteric teaching, present in mostly any religions. For Jeppe 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.[18] That is, the conflation of the normal fact that members of a given culture share much more than members of any other groups, with the - incorrect and often harbinger of political and social tension - idea that any members of a given social group/culture share an essential trait that makes them a species on their own, unable to any exchange or understanding between any other social groups. It is true, says Jeppe Jensen, 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 same fact that we can sort out the differences demonstrates a certain degree of commensurability. In other words, in any kind of contrast among point of views one can ideally individuate the common ground upon which they diverge, but this is a matter of interpretation, not epistemic privileges. Finally, the insider-outsider 'problem' can be seen as a variation of the philosophical problem of "other minds". According to this latter we have unmediated ('true') access only to our own minds, while we are precluded to genuine appreciation of other minds. However, this intuitive idea doesn't take into account 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 *ib*: 44). In this perspective even the most individual self-knowledge is mediated

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[18] On cultural essentialism see *infra* 2.3.2, cfr. also above 1.6.3 with postcolonial and orientalism issues.

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. Jeppe Jensen therefore concludes that the insider-outsider distinction should refer only to a gradient, not a rift and that engaging it as an epistemological issue runs the risk to create a veiling mystique with unwanted consequences also in teaching and learning context (*ib*.: 31).

1.9 Relevance of the study of religion\s

It is a widespread argument that the role of the humanities in building contemporary societies is increasingly being eroded by the preference, on the part of a vast range of stakeholders in the field of education and research, towards disciplines more oriented to practical goals such as business profit, employment and technological advancement (see e.g. Nussbaum 2010: 1-11). Consequently, also scholars of religion\s have started reflecting about the relevance of their field and how it can contribute to the general progress and well-being of society. Since it is my argument that RE should represent in great part a dissemination of this discipline through the educative process, it is worth briefly examining some positions, as they will resumed and ampliated later, near the conclusion. Tweed (2016:807) identified three interrelated foci of the arguments for the defense of the study of religion\s: advancement of knowledge, enrichment of individuals, and improvement of society.

The first one concerns mainly with the - now hardly fashionable - motivation of the value of knowledge for knowledge itself. However, it has been argued (Engler and Stausberg 2011:138) that providing substantive knowledge regarding religious phenomena can be of value also for other contexts such as government, business, and the media, especially in cross-cultural situations. As a concrete example, tourism is an increasingly important arena where knowledge about religion is traded, mediated, and popularized (see also Norman 2016). In public debates related to religion, this discipline may provide critical knowledge of great potential value in many contexts. When social conflicts concerning religion rise, the study of religion\s can contribute to the objective clarification of problematic areas and individuate consequences (positive, negative or neutral) which particular religious standpoints may have for society. But also concerning the general development of public policy regarding religions, it can contribute with reliable, non-partisan information and an interpretative framework (Franke and Pye 2004: 14). This is not much in virtue of a supposed, hard sciences-like detachment, but thanks to its baggage of empirically and theoretically informed ideological critique (Engler and Stausberg 2011:138, see above 1.7) regarding, for example, the ways

in which religion in general and specific religions in particular are (mis-)represented in public discourse.

Turning towards the issue of the rapid changes in contemporary societies, Antes (2017) observes that, since religiously homogenous area disappearing, multicultural and multireligious societies will be more in need of competences and knowledge in order to deal with increasingly numerous specific traditions. This is because the globalization and the growing exchange of people, information and goods does not necessarily bring about mainly homogenization results. Instead, it could highlight and enhance differences also within 'native' religious traditions. For example, in place of having in a single nation - Germany in the argument of Antes - just the two traditional confessions of Catholicism and Protestantism, there will be the increasing presence also of Polish, Spanish or Italian Catholics and the various protestant free churches of Baptist, Methodist or Seventh-day Adventists. In a similar way, Orthodox differentiate not only in, say, Russian or Greeks, but even Syrian, Coptic or Armenian. And this is just the case of Christianity. Speaking about religious plurality, Pye (2007) suggests that the study of religion\s may function as kind of third party in the context of interreligious dialogue, by providing intellectual mediation between particular religions in a form of a neutral framework, and by clarifying the nature and the historical development of religions in a non- polemical way.

It can be easily surmised that the impact of the study of religion\s at the level of society, or the public use of this kind of knowledge, ultimately boils down to the impact to the individual. In general, humanities have been considered, among other things, to guide the individuals and foster in them a sense of fulfilment and happiness. In the case of the study of religion\s scholars have translated this into a 'help' to formulate one's own religious belief or philosophy of life, an approach that, nonetheless, has been criticized as obscuring other important issues (see above 1.7.4). Alternatively, an in a more secular perspective, this discipline has been seen also as a way to explore various answers to the most important questions about human existence (Tweed 2016: 805, 807). Individuals may be positively affected also in their professional contexts. According to Antes (2017:39-40), teachers at any level will need to be equipped with additional knowledge, skill and (self-)critical perspective to cope and manage increasingly multireligious classes, and the same applies for other social workers, such as healthcare professionals, who can be supported by this discipline in cases, for example, in which religiously motivated behavior, such as fasting during Ramadan or the refusal of alcohol in Islam, requires adjustment of the usually prescribed medical advices or treatments. In tandem with the previous arguments of providing cognitive and thinking tools for managing diversity in society and public debates, the study of religion\s is often cited with its educative/upbringing potential of the individual, as can be surmised by the dictum of Max Müller, who said: "He who knows one, knows none". According to Tweed, this discipline has transformative potentials in the attitudes and ethics of

students and scholars in that it may correct that 'blindness' with which we all are afflicted regarding the way of being of people different from ourselves. This is in virtue of the capacity of the discipline of "making the familiar strange and making the strange familiar" (2016: 809), thus hopefully enhancing empathy and the ability to understand others.

1.10 Conclusion

In the sections above we have explored various theoretical and methodological issues at stake when talking about those phenomena commonly referred to as "religion" and "religions", or any other modern terms coined as equivalent of those words stemming from the common Latin root *religio*.

Given the many different approaches to the subject matter, it is safe to say that the underlining common point is the acknowledging of the complex and disputed ontological (what is it?) and epistemic (how can we know it?) status of the object of the study of religion\s, and the ways in which these problems concern the very heart of the field.

Concerning the degree of coherence in the composite and constructed nature of "religion", we have seen scholars dividing into two tendencies. One accords to it a certain consistency among various elements that justify the creation of the theoretical object "religion". The other highlights instead the heterogeneity of the elements and, above all, the historical construction of the concept of religion. In this regards, critical scholars claim that epistemological purposes are inextricably entangled with issues of power, protection of interest of certain groups, and universalizing ideology.

In relation to these two opposing tendencies of a same spectrum, cognitive science of religion represents a kind of divergent approach. Similar to the "constructive" side of scholars, which aims to clarify a group of phenomena, describing and explaining the meaningful relations that qualifies them as "religion", also CSR want to explain them, especially on hard and naturalistic ground. However, tackling them as "religious" is just a preliminary step. If future research and experiments will find the category of religion not useful or coherent to classify certain phenomena from the point of view of the universal functioning of the human mind, many CSR scholars may willingly discard it as well.

Those scholars that position themselves on the deconstructionist side of the spectrum, instead, feature scientific aims of clarification and explanation too, but the object are instead those historical, social and cultural processes that concurred to create and naturalize a concept that, as everyday experience shows, is more often than not taken as granted and not problematic. Furthermore, is evident in this trend of scholarship also an ethical stance of critically individuating and highlighting those power-related mechanisms, as well as past and present inequal behaviors that are connected to various kinds of rhetoric about "religion". In particular, those kinds of rhetoric claiming a merely

'spiritual' nature and supposed irrelevance of religion in regard to contexts involving power or material interest. These critiques are furthermore linked to the acknowledgement, among others, of the theological roots of the study of religion\s and how 'religionist' or crypto-theological approaches have been present till recent times in the field, around which they still 'orbit' and sometimes intersect.

We have seen, however, that a common methodology could be employed in both tendencies of scientific enquiry, and also that the "constructive side" of scholarship is well aware of the dangers, both epistemological and 'ethical', of essentializing religion or confusing the theoretical object with the subject matter. As King remarks (2017), 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 in our self-consciousness, by exposing hidden presuppositions.

Moreover, CSR approach is not destined to be a stand-alone one, but could be embedded, as we have seen with Tweed (2006) and Jeppe Jensen (2014) with more 'traditional' hermeneutical approaches. In particular, in my view, CSR may offer a more thoughtful and less 'creative', 'deductive' or 'subjective' perspective in treating the psychological aspects of religion, without resorting to suggestive yet ambiguous definition of "being grasped by an ultimate concern" (Tillich 1963: 6) or calling upon a special sensibility to religious data.

In summary, it is possible to combine the various approaches above discussed. As a way to take stock of what has been explored above in function of the tasks ahead - that is, the analysis of various RE models and my proposal of a RE focused on Asian religions - I will now sort out some criteria or analytic themes in order to examine and assess the 'religion side' of RE theories and practices.

Unsurprisingly, the first element addressed will be the concept of religion employed. It is implicitly used without any specification, or it is explicitly put forward or even problematized? Which kind of concept it is? What is the ontological and epistemic status of religion? How many dimensions (cfr. Stausberg and Engler 2016) does these implicit or explicit theories of religion consider? Next is the level of self-reflexivity in relation to issues put forward by the critical study of religion\s. Are "religion" and "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? Or, more in general, how comprehensive are the representations of religion\s adopted, and conversely, how much they are stereotyped and modelled after a Christian-Protestant paradigm? More generally, how the concept of religion employed and/or the representation of religions chosen address the highly problematic dialectic between universality and diversity surrounding the subject matter "religion\s"? Finally, how are religions studied? Which are the epistemological devices (comparison, explanation, description, etc.) used? How is the insider-outsider issue addressed?

CHAPTER 2: EDUCATION

2.1 Introduction

Like religion, also education does not lend itself to a simple definition, especially because, as Biesta (2015: 256) points out, it is an "essentially contested concept" insofar it is ultimately a normative idea. That is, discussions about its meaning more than often resolve around not what the concept means, but what it *should* mean, in strict correlation with people's values and beliefs about what is to be considered as a *good* or *worthwhile* 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 a wider sense of training the body and the senses (*mores*), 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, such as literature, arts, vocational training and so on, as well as all kinds of beliefs (Oelkers 2001:4234-6).

Another widely used distinction (Biesta 2015: 256ff) comes from the German language 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 and, therefore, with the idea itself of what it means to be educated. It emphasizes relational and generational aspects, in opposition to an upbringing conceived as conforming or obeying the older generation, as it points to the dynamic engagement of the person as subjective participant, with his/her individual inner drive and attitudes, with the social community. Also *Bildung* has a strong connotation of active subjectivity. Ødegaard and White (2018: 77) define it as "self-formation processes that go on within certain conditions and mechanisms". In this sense this concept has been taken up by critical pedagogy, especially the one developed in Germany in connection with the Frankfurter School. In this perspective, *Bildung* is not merely an introduction to existing culture, but it is also what enables to detect and unveil the conditions for power and knowledge (*ib.* 78).

These two sides of education, moreover, frame themselves inside three generally recognized purposes of education (Biesta 2015: 257). First, educational systems, especially formal ones, are expected to provide *qualification*, i.e. knowledge, skill, understanding, and often also dispositions and attitudes. These are supposed to allow learners to be able to 'do something' not only in very specific situations, such as a job, but also in very general terms as well, such as living in complex societies. Secondly, education is also of 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. Here the *Erziehung* dimension of providing social fitness is combined with the interactive and relational aspect of *Bildung*. Last but not least, education should be seen also as a mean 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 main focal points individuated by 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, even in relation to formal acceptable behavior (here we have *educazione* in the sense of good manners or etiquette). Although general/universal in its aims, *educazione* always bears with itself the peculiar mark of the context (persons, society, institutions) that promotes and manages it (17-8).

The second one is the focal point of *istruire,* in the sense of transmitting to, filling and providing someone not only with the basic knowledge to survive, but more importantly, with tools that enable her/him to generate new knowledge and new opportunities. *Istruire* is more related to the production and management of knowledge, in the twin sense of "knowing-that", i.e. forming propositional knowledge, ranging from general values to field-specific notions, and "knowing-how", i.e. those technical knowledge one can master only through learning-by-doing. As can be seen, *istruzione* is not necessarily focused on the whole of the person, but more on her/his intellectual or practical training. However, to avoid a limited conceptualization of *istruzione* we must take into account not only the acquisition of knowledge/skill by a subject, but also how such knowledge/skill are produced, managed, evaluated and accepted by the community(ies) of reference, which can range from a single professional association, to the university, or the society at large itself, in all their cultural, political, social, organizational and institutional aspects.

From this perspective Margiotta (18-9) connects such aspect of *istruzione* to the concept of *formazione*. This latter, for him, means to "give form to action", in the sense of self-directed action of the subject to fulfill her/his project and self-development and, in concert with the hetero-directed

actions of the environment (e.g. society at large) which enable and adapt the subject to do so. *Formazione* is related, among many things, to the above-mentioned concept of *Bildung*, to the experiential and interactional model of education of Dewey (cfr. e.g. Mintz 2018), and to the Weberian concept of *Beruf*, in the sense of rationalization and self-organization of the subject in front of the two pivotal issues of responsibility and self-fulfillment.

In a similar yet more sweeping way, Moscato (2009) distinguishes between *educazione* and *formazione*, from the point of view of autonomy. *Educazione* is defined as a long-term interaction process between a young subject and a certain number of relevant adult figures with whom said subject entertains various types of relations (including conflict). Such process takes place within a certain socio-cultural horizon and is supposed to provide a certain degree of autonomy, in the sense of autonomous establishment of norms for one's own behavior (intellectual, technical, social, political, ethical), in accord to standards set up by the society and culture of reference. In a narrower sense *educazione* means that complex of action, narratives, rituals and communication through which the adults negotiate and transmit to the youngster - implicitly or explicitly - the cultural horizon of reference. At the same time this process includes the complex of actions and experiences the subject actively performs towards her/his quest for autonomy. *Formazione* indicates a larger process, comprehensive of *educazione*, in which a subject, already with an accepted degree of autonomy, actively uses it in her/his quest of giving a desired form to her/his individual humanity accordingly to the socio-cultural horizon of reference.

<div align="center">***</div>

Although nothing but a brief sketch, the above discussion shows the multifarious, yet interrelated dimensions of the phenomenon called "education", and therefore one may engage an exploration of it from a variety of starting points. As anticipated in the introduction, it is my explicit aim to explore the conditions and possibility of a SoR-based RE focused on the topic of Asian religious traditions, as well as to develop relative constitutive concepts. Therefore, I had to start from an epistemological base (i.e. the study of religion\s as discipline), *both* in the sense of the modality of research *and* in the sense of the knowledge thus produced. The latter is characterized by a highly specific, complex - and often internally contested - set of propositional and methodological contents, a part of which have been explored in the chapter above. Consequently, I think it is a logical way of proceeding to engage first of all the issue of how these contents *could* and *should* be transmitted and acquired by learners. In other words, I need to engage primarily with didactics, i.e. that science of education which focuses on the object of teaching and learning, or, recalling Margiotta, the above cited focal point of *istruzione*. Although some observations will perhaps sound commonsensical or redundant[19], they will be useful

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[19] As they sounded to me, a specialist of Study of religion, when I approached them for the first time.

in formally structuring and identify key elements and processes relevant to our general discussion. Since Anglo-Saxon regions the fields of pedagogy and didactics are usually conflated or differently divided (cfr. Hamilton 1999 and 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. I will briefly touch the general aspect of didactics, in its two dimensions of general and disciplinary didactics (i.e. didactics of a specific discipline, e.g. history). Subsequently, I will focus on the issue of "didactic transposition". This concept, firstly created by Chevallard (1985), is meant to provide theoretical and methodological tools to engage the question of which kind of transformation and manipulation a well-define corpus of discursive practices needs to undergo in order to be effective for a teacher to teach and a learner to learn, which is basically our main problem. It is also a useful perspective from which touching other relevant issues such as 'didactic engineering' (Brusseau: 2008).

However, as also observed above, the focal point of *istruzione* is connected with the larger ones of *formazione* and *educazione*. What permits this connection is the notion of the social practices of reference (see *infra* 2.3.4), which influences the axiologization of a certain knowledge, that is, the choice of how and which aspects of that knowledge ought to be transmitted on the basis of certain values. From another perspective, we can think, as Baldacci (2012) does, of two intertwined basic curricula in school education. A first one (*istruzione*) concerns itself mainly with the short-term acquisition and evaluation of knowledge and skills typical of certain disciplines or fields. This is what is primarily engaged by didactics. The second curriculum (*educazione*) exceeds the limits of 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, and it is engaged primarily by pedagogy. The connection between the two curricula lies in an idea of learning with two main levels: in the first we have the short-term cognitive changes and adaptations, typical of school subjects-related instruction. In the long run these processes may elicit the acquisition of more lasting competences and mental habits that can belong to a certain area (logical-mathematical, historical...), or be of more general nature (analysis, synthesis, critical thought, ethical reflections...). 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 became ungrounded moralizing, and the latter without the former became shortsighted and pointless inculcation (12).

Therefore, from a seemingly narrow perspective concerning only how to teach a particular corpus of knowledge, I will subsequently move to explore which, in my hypothesis, could be suitable educative outcomes - in the sense of the above cited concept of *Bildung*, socialization and *formazione*

- to be linked to my project of Asian religions-focused RE. These outcomes are individuated in what can be called "intercultural, democratic citizenship education". In order to do this, I will rely mainly on studies and publication issued by supranational bodies such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe. Since these are themes deemed pivotal by such institutions, it is expected to find in them an update state of art of the field, including critical remarks (e.g. Mansouri 2017) to those supranational recommendations published from these bodies themselves.

2.2 General didactics and disciplinary didactics

The birth of didactics as a theorical reflection about teaching is traditionally individuated in the publication of *Didactica Magna* (1640) by Jan Amos Komenský (lat. Comenius,1592-1670). He wrote it in the perspective of conceptualizing teaching as a 'universal art' capable of ensuring effective results regardless of topics and learners (Perla 2013: 33). However, its development as a scholarly discipline in itself can be traced back in an important change in European societies which took place starting from the eighteenth century, that is, the institutionalization of knowledge. From being a personal, private and singular transmission of competences to pupils belonging to certain social classes, teaching a social and public activity, addressed towards various types of pupils, to be carried out in specific time and places (D'Amore and Frabboni 2005: 109).

Didactics is the scientific study of that fields of practices concerning the phenomena teaching and learning in its own terms. As such it is different from other approaches such, as a sociological perspective on teaching and learning (Baldacci 2013: 25), and its main perspective is towards the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning (Bonaiuti, Calvani, Ranieri 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 (i.e. in appointed institutions such as schools), informal (taking place during everyday activity such as daily work or socialization) and non-formal (somehow between the previous two).

As a research object, teaching can be engaged in different ontological perspectives. In one case it can be conceived as having a strong ontology, that is, teaching and learning are characterized by laws-similar constants, embedded in the universal biological makeup of human being. In the opposite case of weak ontology, principles and categories of teaching are relative to historical, social and cultural contexts. Finally, there can be also a complex ontology, that takes into account the two previous perspectives and conceives teaching as having both natural and social dimensions. Such complex ontology in turn shapes a likewise complex epistemology that involves both empirical observations

of phenomena in order to catch their inherent principles (e.g. experimental psychology of learning processes) and logic-theorical analysis carried out on the basis of axiomatic ideas, theories or models.

Concerning the theorical conceptualization of the object of teaching, it is useful not to rely on a rigid definition, but to resort instead to conceptual structures, in order to highlight pivotal knots and relations that make up the phenomenon of teaching, in accord to the *applied perspective*. Indeed, there can be various kinds of structures (Baldacci 2013: 26-32; see also Pentucci 2018: 41-4) accordingly to the types and number of variables (teacher, learner, content, act, medium, process, context...) deemed relevant for a given enquiry. Moreover, the choice of relevant variables is often influenced by the applied overarching approach, which in didactics are generally divided in three main approaches: Activism, Cognitivism, and Constructivism. Therefore, at this point a brief mention of these latter is in order. This will give us also a chance to explore further the various aspects of the sphere of human behavior engaged by didactics. It is worth adding, moreover, that these three approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Activism is the first (also in chronological terms) approach and is process-oriented. It has been carried out by famous pedagogists like Maria Montessori (1870-1952) and John Dewey (1859-1952). 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 in 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 human community. The Cognitive approach, instead, is product-oriented and its focus is to identify which procedures are most suitable to reach and evaluate well-defined learning outcomes. It aims to create formal and general theories that rely on a mainly linear causal logic. It tries to exploit the potentialities of 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 idea of learning is quite different from Activism and it is generally conceived as a *mastery* of something. The last (also in chronological term) approach 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 predate knowledge of it, but is co-construed through social interaction. The varied range of didactic theories informed by this approach focuses on the complex and 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[20] and so on. Pivotal in this sense are the 'implicit knowledges' within all these elements: the pre-knowledge of the pupils, the knowledges embodied in the artefacts, the general knowledge embedded in the biographies of the actors involved, and so on (cfr. on this paragraph Bonaiuti, Calvani, Ranieri 2017:20-32 and Perla 2013: 38-45).

Before returning to the question of the identification of the phenomenon of teaching, since we are dealing with a fairly identifiable corpus of knowledge engaging the topic of religion\s, we should shift from the dimension of general didactics to disciplinary didactics (Nigris 2013, D'Amore and Frabboni 2005). Indeed, general didactics engages with topics such as teaching methodologies, organizational aspects of teaching institutions, issues of inter- and co-disciplinarity, cognitive styles of learners, social relationships in classrooms, nature of artefacts and evaluation techniques. In other worlds, the aim is the study of the general processes of teaching and learning, irrespective of the kind of subject to be taught and learned (D'Amore and Frabboni 2005: 111). Disciplinary didactics, instead, starts from the basic observation that teaching is always teaching of *something* (74), and therefore we can rely on the conceptual structure of teaching employed by disciplinary didactics, which is the following (adapted from Baldacci 2013: 31):
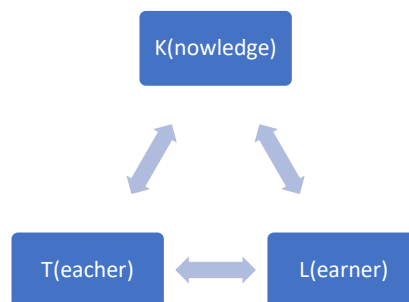
Although seemingly simply, this triangle, with its vertices and sides, synthesizes the multiple elements and relations at stakes (Nigris 2013, D'Amore 2001, D'amore and Frabboni 2005, Martini 2012). First, there is Knowledge, which sometimes is indicated as "cultural object" or "teaching object", which has its own logic, foundational concepts, its development with continuities and discontinuities, technical terminology etc. In other words, its "*epistemology*" and the relative issues such as the "epistemological obstacles" (see *infra* 2.3.3). Around this vertex, moreover, it is involved also the historical character of that Knowledge, i.e. its social/historical acknowledgement as a distinct branch of knowledge deserving a specific treatment and relevance for education. The Learner vertex

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[20] In the context of 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) (cfr. Parmigiani 2013).

features instead a more psychological dimension and involves issues such the biographical experience as both individual *and* learner, 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, first of all, the individual which is expert of the Knowledge at stake, not necessarily at a cutting-edge level such as an experienced researcher, but able of mastering its epistemology in the above explained sense. Obviously, an influential role is played by its individual biography as learner of that knowledge in the first place. The Teacher usually carries out its function on the basis of various factors: the ideal/model of teaching itself, personal convictions and assumptions regarding the Knowledge, and the expectations concerning the Learner. Last but not least, the Teacher is the one that employs, less or more consciously, accordingly to her/his training as teacher, the various devices that make up the didactic 'toolkit': the artefacts construed and/or employed, the didactical procedures (e.g. frontal lessons, project work, etc..) and aspects of verbal and paraverbal communication (Pezzimenti, N/D).

Turning our attention to the sides, i.e. the relationships between elements, we start from the KL side, whose 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 her/his own personal and gradual construction first of knowledge, then of competence.[21] This construction, in fact, takes place in the interaction between: 1) Learner's previous knowledge, her/his images, models and representations (including stereotypes) of the Knowledge, 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 mediators between the Learner and the Knowledge. The TL side involves a somehow wider, pedagogical dimension insofar it points to that particular personal relationship whose origins go back in time: the relation 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 a role-model (or anti-model). Teachers can be seen also as a guide for the active exploration of the Learner (opposed to passive instruction). The main activities involved in the TL side are *devolution* towards the Learner, i.e. the Teacher's encouragement towards the Learner to become actively involved in the didactic project, and the acceptance of such encouragement. That is, the Learner taking the responsibility of the construction of her/his own knowledge. Factors influencing these activities

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[21] In this context is useful to identify "competence" as the dynamic mobilization and deployment of relevant psychological resources such as attitudes, skills, knowledge and/or understanding (sometimes also values are added) in order to respond appropriately and effectively to the demands, challenges and opportunities that are presented by a given context (see e.g. CoE. 2018 vol. I: 32 or the definition by the European Commission of the *key competences for lifelong learning*, E.C. 2019: 15).

are the pedagogical relations just cited and the various expectations the Teacher has concerning the Learner and vice-versa. The last side is TK, whose main activity is *teaching*, and at this point various observations are of order. First of all, it is not entirely up to the Teacher to decide which Knowledge should be taught, nor s/he is the foremost authority of it. Rather, s/he is an interpreter of K and, often, of the political-cultural reasons behind the choice of K made by appointed actors (e.g. educational authorities and policymakers). Consequently, the personal assumptions and convictions of the Teacher concerning the nature of K and its general educational value (e.g. in terms of *Bildung*) are influential factors in the 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. As already noted, Teacher's role is not to be at the edge of the research and to create new Knowledge. Instead, s/he is expected to adapt K to the needs and levels of Learners (even each individual learners) and make sure that this K does have an impact on Learners, also beyond 'scholastic' competence[22] of it, and in accord to a variety of factors, first and foremost the general socio-cultural horizon, 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, which I will use to articulate and explore in detail the above touched issues. I will proceed by employing, with a little tweak, the identification by Rossi and Pezzimenti (2013) of four perspectives from which addressing the various aspects of didactic transposition, namely the epistemological, teaching, learning and axiological dimensions.

2.3 Didactic transposition

The process of teaching-learning has a complex nature that goes beyond a simplistic educative dimension in which the only two actors are the pupil and the teacher. Taking into account the concept of didactic transposition means to refuse any 'transmissive' logic and any romantic idea of direct or 'spiritual' relation between pupils and teachers. In addressing the perspective of didactic transposition, it is useful to distinguish (Perrenoud 1998) between *savoirs* and *connaisance*. The former, often indicated as *savoirs sauvants*, indicate those impersonal knowledges, values and practices with no explicit trace of their genesis or reference to social context, which are activated and referred to every time a new knowledge is to be produced and organized. However, these 'knowledges' should not be

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[22] I.e. in the sense of an understanding or mere memorizing of a given topic only for the sake of being able to pass a relative examination (cfr. D'Amore and Frabboni 2005: 73).

referred to as 'fixed' or 'true', as they are constantly re-produced, changed and sometimes eliminated (Achiam 2014: 1). *Connaisances* are instead the subjective side of the *savoirs*, contextualized, personalized, entangled with the mental structure of the knowing subject, that concur in building her/his competence (see above n. 12). Basically, the birth of a scientific knowledge can be conceived when a *connaisance* (of one or more researcher) gains the status of *savoir savant*. Conversely, the passage from the *savoir savant* to *connaisance* is conceptualized as training or formation. So, how a *savoir*, or knowledge, becomes *connaisance* or knowledge learned? The didactic transposition (hereafter DT) theory is a concept introduced first by Chevallard (1985) and then adopted and reworked by various scholars. Its role is to provide both descriptive and normative framework for the above-mentioned process. The first one is meant to individuate the key passages of this process, studying the conditions and limits of this transposition. The normative side of the theory focuses instead on how DT should be carried on so that learned knowledge "ne rende pas impossible le passage ultérieur au savoir savant" (Clerc, Minder, Roduit 2006: 3), through the individuation of the main issues and areas of intervention relevant to the expected functioning of the process.

As a first step we can start by delineating the stages of DT with the following diagram (adapted and reworked from D'Amore 2008: 177):

Scholarly knowledge
(Monographs, journal articles, etc.).

Epistemological adaptation.

Knowledge to be taught
(Institutional curricula, regulations, textbooks, syllabi, etc.).

Epistemological adaptation, 'didactic engineering'.

Knowledge taught
(Actual teaching activity, planning and implementation).

EXTERNAL DT

Devolution, acceptance of being in charge of learning.

Learned knowledge
(Individual construction of knowledge by pupils).

INTERNAL DT

Evaluation, exercise, application.

Competence
(Capacity of the individual of deploying relevant knowledge and skills).

AIMS OF DT

Personal development (e.g. in higher education).

New scholarly knowledge
(Mastering and updating learned knowledge).

The first two stages make up the External DT, because they involve other institutions beside the schools, such as universities and other knowledge producing centers (ministries and other educational authorities). These are collectively termed as the "noosephere" in that they represent the place where relevant ideas on teaching (contents, aims, objectives, societal expectations, and so on) are debated. The noosephere is basically the intermediary between the school system (including the activities of each individual teacher) and the larger socio-cultural context (D'Amore 1999: 221). Relevant actors in this regard are academicians involved in education and in education-relevant topics, representatives of educational systems (e.g. national teachers associations), textbooks authors (who could be academicians, teachers, or both), politicians and public officers. To offer a simple yet pertinent example, External DT is where school syllabi and textbooks are defined and created, and where basically the scholarly knowledges become *knowledge to be taught*.

The internal DT stages mark instead what happens in school, especially inside the classroom. The teacher has to start from institutional indications and materials, such as the above cited syllabi and textbooks, but s/he inevitably will make adjustments, or will focus on certain topic instead of other

ones and so on. S/he will do it on the basis of various factors, such as her/his epistemological interpretation of the disciplines or more simply her/his subjectivity and educational/moral values (Rossi and Pezzimenti 2013: 130-3). In other words, we have a further modification of *knowledge to be taught* into more precise learning objects, which nonetheless vary from teacher to teacher (cfr. 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 inevitability a process of didactic mediation takes place in 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 'toolbox' of a teachers, such as didactic strategies, materials and resources used, communication techniques and so on. Finally, the *knowledge learned* represents the outcome of this mediation and ultimately of the whole process of DT, and it is influenced, in this latter stage, by pupils-related factors already touched above such as learning styles, previous knowledge, personal interest and so on.

By now it should be clear that throughout this process the knowledges produced by universities change their status, in various aspects. First of all, they are no more full-fledged "theoretical knowledge" in the sense that they are capable of being flexibly applied in different situations, nor they are "practical knowledge" in the sense they are subjected to precise condition of use. They become *savoirs scolaires* (Develay 1995) and as such they are better defined as propositional knowledge. The reason is that they tend to be more of "a savoir qui se contente d'énoncer des contenus, sous forme de propositions logiquement connectées" (*ib.*: 25). 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 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, for the very reason that such paradigms do not have to respond only to scientific criteria, but also to other criteria such as determination of objects of study, tasks to be assigned to pupils, propositional knowledge (e.g. physic law or historical facts) and procedural knowledge, i.e. the application of propositional knowledge (cfr. Develay 1995: 27-30).

Scholarly knowledge produced in research context undergoes various processes and therefore is quite a different thing from what takes place in various different levels of DT (educational authorities, school curricula, actual practices in class). In order to be constantly aware of how it, 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). Accordingly, one of the purposes

of the DT theory envisioned by Chevallard is also to exert an 'epistemological vigilance' on the relationship between *savoirs savants* and *savoirs scolaires* and to avoid the creation of a 'monumental knowledge' (Chevellard 2004: 4-8) in which students are invited to contemplate bodies of knowledge the rationale of which have perished in time. [23]

Let us address more in details the above-mentioned aspects of DT by starting from the point of view of the epistemology of the knowledge to be transposed.

2.3.1 Didactic transposition: epistemological dimension

One of the main issues tackled by didactics, already in the 1960s, has been the question of how to create school curricula and syllabi that reflect basilar principles of the disciplines of reference while adapting their complexity to the capacity of common teachers and common pupils. The basic principles followed were to focus on the formative elements of the disciplines, i.e. their 'mindset' and to safeguard the structural aspects of the disciplines when re-constructing and re-presenting their contents (Rossi & Pezzimenti 2013:130-1, 136-7).

Indeed, having a solid grasp of the key epistemological issues of the scholarly knowledge, such as research methodology, fundamental concepts and theories, technical terms, typology of objects, modalities of validation and historical condition of scientific progress, is, obviously, critical for all actors involved in DT. This can be clearly seen in the following three main aspects of the epistemological dimension of DT. First, there must be an individuation of those pivotal and indispensable elements such as postulates, fundamental approaches (in the case of the Study of religion\s, one fundamental approach may be the "avalutativity" towards the variety of religions) and key distinguishing concepts. Secondly, suitable contents 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*, an effective DT should present the domain of knowledge in question in terms of continuities and discontinuities, focusing on the obstacles and conflicts which are inherent to the production of

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[23] An example of this situation is given by Clément (2007, cit. in Achiam 2014: 5-6). He enquiries about the persistence of partial representations in cell illustrations of biology textbooks. Typically, in these texts plant cells are portrayed as adjacent to other cell and with hard cellulose cell wall, whereas animal cells are portrayed as isolated with a soft cell membrane. From the point of view of academic biology this is problematic because both animal and plant cell can occur in isolation and in juxtaposition with other cell, and not all plant cells have hard cell walls. He discovered first of all that, at the level of knowledge learned, the pupils exploit this evident (albeit partial) difference as being prototypical of animal/plan cell distinction, because it is useful to be memorized in order to pass an exam. At the level of knowledge taught, on the other hand, it is very common to use onion epidermis cells and human mouth epithelium cell (which feature this kind of difference between them) as sample for observation exercise in laboratory. Finally, another reason has been found in a historical division between academic departments of Botany and Zoology, which created a tension concerning who had the right to define what is a cell.

that knowledge. This means implementing a transposition of the epistemological status that allows a reconstruction of the historical and human (therefore amenable to errors) development of the discipline. In other words, to avoid a static a monolithic representation (Develay 1995: 11-12, Nigris 2013: 55-61).

These measures, in particular the third one, should bring forth positive effects such as helping the pupils not to be intimidated by impersonal and a-temporal 'monumental' knowledge, but to be introduced into the dynamic and multifarious nature of the discipline and being thus able to find her/his suitable observation point. Moreover, to retrace the past errors within the discipline is to engage with an activity analogous to those of the scholar itself. Finally, individuating prior postulates, limits, evolution and open questions serves also to the important educative aim of creating a critical distance and avoiding that any knowledge comes to be seen as 'absolute' (Nigris 2013: *ib.*).

Martini (2012) and Nirchi (2014) offer some operative criteria to carry out the above-mentioned passages. From a general point of view, there should be an 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, balance, controllability, problematization* and *historicization*.

To essentialize means to address those elements that characterize that knowledge, i.e. the already cited fundamental notions, specific problems, specific languages, research methods etc., in a way in which the relationships between the three main dimensions (conceptual, methodological and terminological) are explicit. In essentialization are involved issues of economy, effectiveness and 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 is condensed in a limited space of pages or when it synthetizes a vast amount of other information. A knowledge can be defined essentialized when, albeit in a reduced format, retains a full epistemological meaningfulness (Tessaro 2002: 26). Martini (2012: 52-3) suggests individuating, among the different essential elements of the scholarly knowledge, the "foundational nuclei", that is, those areas or knots in which many essential elements (concepts, methods, terms, topics) are likely to be found together and/or those area 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 how the essentiality of a given knowledge is subject to historical change and is constantly fluctuating due to the production of new knowledge, whose relevance to the 'essential core' of the discipline is obviously debated. The degree in which such new developments should be taken

into account is based on how they re-organize the fundamental structures and vision of the discipline (Tessaro 2002*:* 26-27).

Once the essential elements are selected, they should be engaged, in terms of time allocation, maintaining a certain *balance* between the conceptual, methodological and terminological aspects. In other words, it does not make sense presenting to pupils all the fundamental concepts at once and saving the explanation of technical terms or methods for later. Indeed, continuously shifting between various epistemological aspects 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. Therefore, the individuation and formulation of both general and specific learning objectives (more on this in 2.2.2) are pivotal for ensuring the *controllability* of the teaching process (Martini 2012: 49-51).

Shifting the focus from the individuation of fundamental epistemological elements (the "what") to a more educational perspective, the criterion of *problematization* addresses the question of "how" these knowledges work. In other words, it calls for the identification of those contexts and situations in which the essential elements above discussed (concepts, methods, languages) are actively recalled and put in 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. Of course, this may often entail somewhat artificial 'experiments' that reenact in smaller scale the typical problems of the scholarly knowledge, but nonetheless the aim is to push in the foreground and make evident the specific way of reasoning of that discipline. The above cited foundational nuclei are particularly apt to this transformation. This criterion is linked also to the *historicization* one, that is, to show which problems and which solutions gave birth to that dialectics between proposal of new theories and confutation of old ones, that constitute the very development of the discipline. The aim of doing this is to enrich further the pragmatic and educational aspect of applying knowledge with the awareness of the historicity of development of human knowledge (cfr. *ib.* 48-9, Nirchi 2014: 8-9).

2.3.2 Didactic transposition: teaching dimension

With the epistemological dimension of DT above discussed, we focused more on the Teacher-Knowledge side of the didactic triangle (see above 1.2.1), that is, on the operation that teachers (and before them, the noosphere) apply to the 'nature' of scholarly knowledge. Here we shift our attention to T-L and K-L sides, which, it is worth recalling, consist more of a mediation between the actions of

the teachers and the actions of the learner, then a mere transmission. In other words, they represent the more 'practical side" of DT.

According to Chevallard (1985:77ff), the knowledge to be taught - more precisely, one of its embodiments in a well-define object of teaching - must have two opposing aspects. It must appear as new, thus opening new paths in the learner's already acquired knowledge, but at the same time it must appear as old, in the sense as being identifiable among the already acquired knowledges. This tension must be well-balanced: if the object is too new, i.e. there is not enough continuity with old knowledge, learning will encounter a bloc. The moment in which this tension is overcome is when learning has taken place, and this determines the obsolescence of the object to be taught which must be renewed. This tension between old and new resonates with a dialectic between past and future experience, in which is true that the former influence the latter, but at the same time also the new experiences may act on the previous one by offering a new perspective.

These observations point to the fact that the teacher "knows in advance" which are the steps, i.e. the different 'evolutions' required to the object in order to elicit learning. S/he thus inevitably has to carry out a linearization of the knowledge to be taught, which originates from a more reticular and very much less linear structure and evolution of the *savoir savant*. This activity is called "chronogenesis" (77).

Apart from knowing in advance, teacher knows more, in the sense that the teacher is supposed to master the various aspects and dimensions of a given object. This means that s/he has to exploit such mastery to offer various ways of teaching[24] in the sense of codifying information in various manners. This should result in the acquisition of that particular perspective that the teacher deems appropriate at that time. This activity is called "topogenesis" (76).

Both chronogenesis and topogenesis are connected to the above-mentioned criterion of controllability: once established the essential elements of a discipline, the most crucial operation for an effective planning of further actions is the individuation of learning objectives. This is a critical step because setting learning objectives means aiming to inner changes of the learning subjects (cognitive, emotional, motivational, behavioral) which are quite difficult to gauge (Bonaiuti, Calvani, Ranieri 2017: 48). What can be done? First of all, 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 (*ib.*: 53-4). A fundamental distinction consists in differentiating between general and specific objectives. The former refers to the long-term acquisition of mind-sets typical of a certain discipline. The latter are

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[24] Among these ways, there should be included, first of all, also methods to evoke wonder and interest in pupils.

more specifically concerned with single competences or knowledge, and their sum should give an approximation of general objectives (Martini 2012: 51-2). This leads us to the topic of the taxonomy of objectives, that is, the conversion of learning contents in a structure of more distinguishable competences to be gained.

There have been developed various general taxonomies of objectives. They are useful in various aspects: to gain an understanding of the different processes involved in the process of learning; to characterize nature and details of the objectives; to divide into different dimensions; and ultimately to organize one's own planning and teaching within a coherent and practical framework. One of the most famous taxonomy is Bloom's one (Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill & Krathwohl 1956). Bloom, following a cognitive perspective, detailed six class of objectives (each divided in further categories and sub-categories): *Knowledge*, *Comprehension*, *Application*, *Analysis*, *Synthesis* and *Evaluation*, which are hierarchically arranged from simplest capacities (to memorize, to recall and identify something) to the most complex ones (to assess, to compare and judge) as a path towards the "mastery" of something. A revised version of Bloom's taxonomy, combining cognitivism and constructionism perspectives, has been proposed by Anderson *et alii* (2001). Here a matrix with two axes is proposed. One axis covers the knowledge dimension, divided in *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 knowledges are then combined with the cognitive process dimension, which is divided, from the simplest to the most complex task, into the activities of *Remembering*, *Understanding*, *Applying*, *Analyzing*, *Evaluating* and *Creating*.

Continuing our shift from 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 N/D). The first ones are, simply speaking, the various teaching methods, and implicitly or explicitly refer to more general theoretical perspectives and models. For example, a cognitivism-based model will focus on providing pupils with the right arrangements of contents so to optimize the learning outcomes, possibly by adapting them to the cognitive makeup of the different pupils (e.g. those more visual-spatial-oriented, those more inclined to logical-thinking, etc.). By applying a constructivist approach, instead, we would have e.g. problem-based learning situations within an environment equipped with adequate resources ("scaffolding") and a choice of problems with wide range of solutions. Pupils are expected to debate among them concerning the solution to be adopted, while the teacher act as a facilitator. There are various examples of teaching methods which obviously cannot be all cited here. However, it is worth considering some recurring parameters. For example, *control*: the traditional frontal lesson is highly manageable, also with crowdy classrooms. However, it neglects important aspects such as activation and involvement of pupils. By

considering also the *interaction* parameter, there can be a frontal instruction divided into little steps/units, spaced out by interaction and feedback. A typical example is the interactive tutorial. By sharing more control with pupils, we may have a participatory lesson, which features only a partial structuration of contents, since the teaching proceeds through a steady interaction in which pupils concur to fill the exposition gaps, i.e. answering questions made by the teacher or completing proposed formulations. The above cited problem-based methodology, instead, features the majority of control on the side of the pupils. Also, in this case the interaction is more pupil-pupil or pupils-environment, than pupils-teacher. By specifying in this example the *objectives* parameter, we may range from a simple discussion in class, to a more elaborate project-work (cfr. Bonaiuti, Calvani, Ranieri 2017: 59-72).

As a guidance among various models and methods, Merril (2002) identifies five principles for an effective learning. The first one is called "Problem" and consists in the claim that authentic problems facilitate learning, but points also to the fact that, instead limiting to inform which kind of abstract competences a pupils would gain, s/he would be facilitated if informed also of which kind of concrete problems s/he will be able to solve. Secondly, there is "Activation", which means that pre-existing knowledge/competences should be activated as foundations for the new inputs. Then we have "Demonstration", which points to the importance of the use of examples and counterexamples, visualization of processes and demonstration of procedures. The fourth principle is called "Application" and calls for providing pupils with occasions in which actually putting in practices the competences gained, accompanied by constant feedback and coaching. Finally, there is "Integration", which means the public/social demonstration of knowledge/skill gained - for example a debate - and connection to real life. This is expected to highly boost motivation for further learning.

Works such the study by Hattie (2009, chs. 8 and 9), which attempts a synthesis of a high number of meta-analysis concerning teaching methods and techniques, provide us with further practical indications. 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, that is, a formal or in-formal assessment procedures 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 in cooperative methods in which more expert pupils, or pupils with different pieces of information/ perspective about the learning object, teach to each other. As for methods allowing for more freedom of action, such as explorative activities like inquiry-based learning through e.g. website browsing, are deemed not very affective due to the high cognitive load involved. A guided problem-solving teaching activity, however, is instead highly evaluated. In conclusion, following also other studies of "evidence-based education" (Bonaiuti, Calvani, Ranieri 2017: 75-7), direct or demi-direct teaching,

with well-set objectives, carefully planned steps, clear instructions, constant feedback, strong refrains and inner connections, should be combined with cooperative activities in small groups focused on peer-learning, and with activities aimed at developing meta-cognitive awareness, e.g. helping pupils finding her/his right style of learning.

Other important elements in teachers' 'toolbox' are the so-called didactic mediators (*mediatori didattici*, see Damiano 1999: 213-28), which are basically all those devices deployed and used by teachers as 'bridges' or 'field of mediation' in which the teaching and learning 'vectors' meet, and the acquisition of the desired content is facilitated. There are four types of them, from the most concrete to the most abstract one. First, we have active mediators, which basically consist in the direct experience of something, e.g. of a given object. An example relevant to our purposes could be a religious practitioner or insider invited during a lesson, who can be seen, listened and asked to. Active mediators are the nearest things to reality. However, they feature the lowest level of conceptualization and generalization (the individuality of a single insider cannot account for the whole of a religious tradition). With iconic mediators, we shift from real-life objects or persons to picture and video portraying them, as well as to sounds, to geographical maps, charts and so on. They help to put a distance from reality and therefore to ease that process of 'reification' of complex empirical reality leading to more general and abstract conceptualization. They still maintain, however, a strong individuality. 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. The third type of mediators are the analogic ones, which include all those activities of simulation and role-play in which various type of signs act like an analogy of the reality referred to. The advantages of these devices are 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 with limited topics. Indeed, if we think especially in case of RE, there can be danger of confusion of levels such as reality/simulation or insider/outsider. The last and more abstract type of mediators are the symbolic ones, which are, simply speaking, languages: numbers, words and other type of symbols that express variables and relations. They permit the highest level of generalization and conceptualization possible, but they do not assure comprehension. As a matter of fact, they can easily remain mere words or formulae learned by heart. As every mediator provides its peculiar point of view of reality, Damiano (231ff) calls for an integrated and reticular (i.e. non-linear, that is, not from the most concrete to the most abstract) use of them.

2.3.3 Didactic transposition: learning dimension

Keeping on with our exploration of DT diagram, from knowledge to be taught (the epistemological dimension) to knowledge taught (the above discussed methods and devices), we reach the level of knowledge learned. D'Amore (D'Amore & Frabboni 2005: 81-101) individuates in the field of didactics some key interrelated issues concerning the learning side of the teaching-learning dyad. He starts from the "didactic contract". This consists basically in what the by the pupil expects as the specific behavior of the teachers, such as providing various kind of constrains (e.g. time, types of outcomes required for a task, etc.), and what the teacher expects as the specific behavior of the pupil, for example, a certain range of interpretations of topics explained in class. However, often these expectations are not explicit, i.e. in the sense of being publicly stated in school regulations or agreed with the teacher, but they are implicit and are strongly dependent on pupils' own ideas about the school in general or the subject in particular (see 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 endeavor to stick to what s/he thinks is the correct answer expected by the teacher, even if the latter asks instead for a personal interpretation. In other case the pupils may - predictably- have a limited view on the subject, for example math as concerned only with calculation, and could be in difficulties when a solution to a problem can be done only using words, because s/he will try instead to use numbers to give a formal answer (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' analysis such as religion and politics (see above 1.7.2 and 1.7.4).

Related to this general issue of 'misconceptions', other relevant concepts for our discussion are cognitive conflicts, images and models. A cognitive conflict emerges when a new, more elaborate information contrasts with former, more naive conception, which nonetheless up to that moment has always functioned well as cognitive tool. For example, the idea that practicing religion means entertaining an exclusive membership to a single tradition. Why do we speak of 'conflicts'? This question leads to the issues of "images" and "models". The former are those mental images anyone can have 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 the input of a concept X, consciously or unconsciously will form a certain image of that concept. However, after successive inputs concerning that concept 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, and will subsume any new inputs. This image thus becomes a model, which could be emerged at the right moment and in accordance with the teacher plan; or could be formed by the pupils before having the chance of being further expanded, causing therefore cognitive conflict and hindering future learning.

Moreover, it is worth noting that if a teacher, in explaining the concept X, uses a preliminary image, which for its simplicity or intuitiveness could be deemed right for that moment, for the very reason of it being so intuitive and convincing, it may become an "intuitive model" (i.e. not self-aware) and hinder further refinement (D'Amore & Frabboni 2005: 92-4).

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, who 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. Let us recall the principle of historicization (see above 2.3.1). It is meant to provide complex and self-critical representation of the discipline of reference, that is, to avoid the idea of a monumental, absolute and complete (i.e. not evolving) knowledge. Accordingly, a teacher must take into serious consideration pupils' previous knowledge and (mis)-conceptions about a given subject, especially those informally acquired outside the classroom. First, this motivates pupils, who see acknowledged their own personal experience beyond the school context, 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 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 or effective in the moment of creation of a concept, in resolving a problem and so on, but that is of no use when dealing with a new problem or when conceptualizing a new information. However, there is a tendency to maintain the knowledge acquired. 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 that idea will contain it itself epistemological obstacles, and therefore, that pupils will probably face hindrances similar to the historical evolution of the discipline (cfr. above 1.1.2 and 1.1.6 for the case of the study of religion\s). However, if this process is correctly handled and pupils go through paradigm changes in a guided and safe way, it becomes instead a productive factor in enhancing a well-rounded understanding of the *savoir savant*.

2.3.4 Didactic transposition: axiological dimension

As stated at the outset of this chapter, it is difficult to provide an evaluative definition of education. This is because no teaching-learning process takes place in a value-free context, especially in public

institutions. In the context of DT, this observation applies both in the first stages (the noosphere) in which institutional curricula and syllabi are built on explicit and/or implicit values, as well as in the last stage (the actual teaching activity), since teachers themselves express certain values through their choices and interpretations of contents from institutional curricula, through their teaching strategies, and through their general behavior or comments during the lesson.

For this reason, Develay (1995) indicates two main dimension or frames of DT. The first one is "didactization", which, as we have seen, starts from *savoirs savants* to be further remodeled. The other one is "axiologization" and starts instead from the notion of "social practices of reference". This is because "les contenus qu'enseignent ces disciplines scolaires correspondent d'abord à un ensemble d'activitiés, des rôles sociaux avant de correspondre à savoirs savant" (26). He proposes this diagram (27):
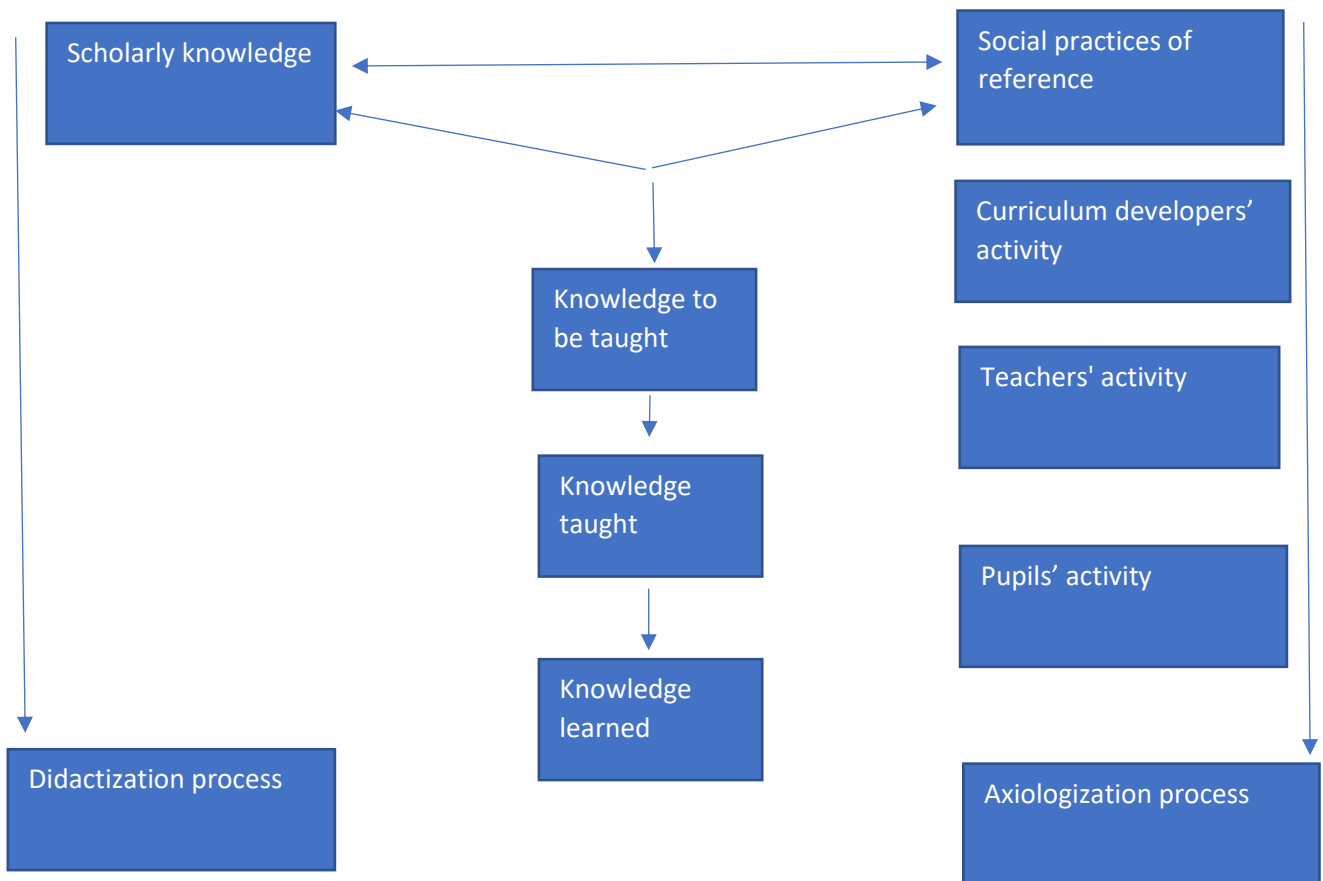
Develay's point is as follows: when *savoirs savant*s are chosen, when certain topics or perspectives inherent in them are deemed formative, and when their modality of didactic transposition are taken in consideration, this process is dependent also on the identification of related social practices that are implicitly or explicitly *chosen as reference for the knowledge to be taught*. Such practices are quite important as they provide sense to what pupil learn and what teachers teach. Basically, they

answer to these questions: what it is that society needs? Which kind of relationships between pupils-knowledge, pupils-pupils, pupils-teachers, pupils-society, knowledge and ideals of society, these choices imply?

Some examples of social practices of reference will help. In the case of history, according to Allieu (1995: 148-9), historical knowledge or consciousness is not an object one usually refers to only in certain particular contexts. He brings the everyday case of a television transmission which intends to explain a certain contemporary event by resorting to its historical background. Historical knowledge should be considered, instead, a *shared language*, because behind the names of famous historical persons, politicians, battles, social categories, places and so on there is also a communication of carefully established information, values, and points of reference. History is also a *practice*, in the sense that is our common practice to engage historically with any kinds of events in various modality. There are, in fact, various uses of history in novels, films or arts, in scheduled celebrations, in politics of memory as well as in politics of oblivion. There is another important social practice related to history, and it is linked to the commonly held idea that history's function is to anticipate future's danger. History is thus strongly connected with the construction of ideology, for example, in the sense that certain events of the past and their underlying values are remembered as errors to be avoided.

Another example from French context (GRAF SES 1995: 271-3) is useful to see a 'twin aspect' of the social practices of reference. In France there is the school subject of socio-economic sciences, and especially for the economic side, the practices of reference can be easily surmised. The authors indeed cite examples of in class role-playing in which one pupil act as a banker, another as a consumer or an entrepreneur asking for a loan. However, outside of this 'insider' practices, it is also put forth the social role of "chercheur en herbe" (272), in the sense of working on hypothesis and analyzing documents in order lay out interpretations that unveil the seemingly simplicity of the initial representations of a certain social fact. An example may be the exploration of the double face of the figure of the entrepreneur, as the 'villain capitalist exploiter' or the 'dynamic creator of employment', or the interpretation of the issue of the share of profit within an enterprise from the two different points of view: one of the entrepreneurs and one of the employees.

A crucial point in this discussion, however, is that only certain social practices will be taken as reference. As Chevallard notes (1989: 8), what makes a given body of knowledge teachable is, first of all, the didactic intent of the society who sets up teaching institutions, which in turn are legitimated from the promise (a social contract) to represent faithfully the knowledge they claim to teach. However, since society comprises various segments, and since there are various ways in which a knowledge may be used, it is quite possible that at last some of these segments will to hold and proclaim different views on the knowledge to be taught. Most probably, because they also refer to

different social practices of reference. For example, entrepreneurs may value more the practical side of a given knowledge, while researchers will emphasize also the theoretical aspects.

Furthermore, the axiological choice of certain social practices greatly influences not only the choice of certain *savoirs savants* among other *savoirs savants*, but even the choice of a certain paradigm, or trend, called by Develay "*matrice disciplinaire*" (1992: 46) within that single *savoir savant.* In other words, 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 e.g. of the importance, for the phenomenologist, of finding a defined common ground among religions, such as "the sacred", *versus* the importance of unveiling the power relationships behind the postulation of this common ground, for critical theorist. 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 (cfr. 46-7).

As can be easily surmised, this discussion on the axiological aspect concerning the choice of social practices of reference puts the light on 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 exclusive monopoly of the field called "study of religion\s" as described in the previous chapter. Religious traditions do produce knowledge about themselves and often the 'academic'/'religious' divide is quite blurred, especially in the case of theological faculties[25]. This is reflected also in the common phenomenon of confessional RE carried out in public school 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 decisional processes leading to RE syllabi (see below 3.1.1). 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. I will address these issues more in detail in the next chapters. For the time being, let us briefly review six main - sometimes overlapping - understandings of the term RE (Parker 2019: 12-5), and their principal social practices of reference. First, we have RE as nurture into a religious way of life. Here the obvious social practices refer to the socialization and initiation in a well-defined religious community. Next, there is the concept of RE as a "practical theology" (13), which has precise confessional roots in protestant theology, but can found also beyond the limit of Christian community. It is aimed at fostering in pupils the development or deepening of their personal faith,

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[25] Indeed, the "reflexive turn" in the study of religion\s, along with the general postmodern critique of the claims of truthfulness or objectivity of the modern scientific endeavor, on one hand addressed more in deep, as we have seen, the problem of hidden theological (and non-theological) agendas in the field. On the other, it pushed some scholar, such as Filoramo (2019: 23-7) to rethink the barrier and relationship between the study of religion and theology.

without strong pastoral constrains and drawing, apart from theology, also 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. However, a similar categorization can be done also without any national sponsorship of a given religion. Again with the case of England and Wales, connecting RE to the issue of "community cohesion" among different religious communities is "part of a gamut of strategies by which migrant groups can be assimilated into a host culture" (14). Recently RE has been addressed in terms 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 (*ib.*) understands the latter as " 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 in this sense, it is often grouped with foreign language learning and the just mentioned citizenship education. Finally, the last understanding of RE refers to its being a preparation to 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 to the perspective of RE as a *savoir scolaire* in function, among others, of a broadly defined "social practice of intercultural citizenship". Therefore, my next step is to introduce the issue of intercultural education, a discussion of which will complete my theoretical-normative framework of reference concerning education.

2.4 Intercultural education
2.4.1 Whence intercultural education?

According to Portera (2013:89-130), the concept of "intercultural education" has been employed for the first time in late 19th/early 20th century by educators and policy makers in US as a way of contrasting discriminatory and racist attitude towards immigrants coming from Europe. The basic assumption and rhetoric were that similarities are more important that differences, therefore until the 1960' there were mainly assimilationist educational aims, feeding the ideology of the "melting pot". Afterwards, in conjunction with the civil rights movements and manifestations for the emancipation of women and black people, a stronger stress on the rights of being different influenced the development of the concept of multicultural education, currently still adopted in many contexts. A similar situation can be seen in many European countries which witnessed early immigration, such as UK, France, Germany or Belgium. After a first phase of assimilationist policy, focused primarily on linguistic problems, many educational projects of multicultural characters took place. However,

from the 1980' onward, a new idea of intercultural education, focused more on the "inter" suffix, and aimed at going beyond the previous multicultural approach, developed out of a series of important considerations.

The term "multiculturalism" is supposed to refer to the natural state of diversity between and within various societies and communities, i.e. the coexistence of different entities at various levels. The multicultural approach, simply speaking, aims therefore to foster individuation, acknowledgement and respect for the various kind of differences and their autonomy. It has basically a relativistic approach and aims to the so-called UN-model, i.e. coexistence of differences in a framework of respect and equality of treatment, on the grounds of common norms. However, such approach has been criticized for being overly static, running the serious risk of crystallizing persons and communities into exotic or folkloric stereotypes. There is no attention to the issue of 'pluriculturalism', i.e. the combination within the single individual of aspects from other cultures, along with subsequent multilayered identity and a complex sense of belonging. Nor is taken into account the *interaction*, i.e. the active and creative side of diversity (cfr. *ib.* 58, 84-5 and 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 incredibly fast movements of persons, goods, information and capital, it is impossible to stop contacts between cultures and heterogeneous groups. The result of this situation is the continuous creation of new cultural, mediatic and also emotional landscapes. As a matter of fact, it is no more feasible to employ a concept of "culture" as an equally shared 'asset' to be transmitted within the border of a stable living 'place', but a more dynamic and pluralistic perspective is necessary (see more in 2.4.2). From the point of view of the individual, in place of a slow, steady and 'passive' identity formation, each person is pushed to actively choose, create and shift between identities. One of the consequences of 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). This is in contrast with other perspectives. Cultural diversity, as stated in the 1° Article of the 2001 *UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*, could be considered instead as a resource in a biological and ecological sense of the term: as biodiversity or genetic diversity are requisites for an ecosystem or species to thrive, so cultural diversity, instead of 'purity', should be sought as a mean to strengthen human survival (cfr. UNESCO 2009: 403).

These are, in a nutshell, the challenges of today's globalized world, which are acknowledged by various supranational actors (see e.g. CoE 2008a: 13-6, UNESCO 2009: 13-8). The educational

debate and research have sought to address these challenges through the development of the intercultural education as a necessary further step to overcome the flaws of the past multicultural approach, starting from the reconceptualization of the idea of culture itself.

2.4.2 The concept of "culture" in intercultural education

Together with religion and education, culture is probably one of the most difficult concepts to define and describe, and to address it in detail is beyond the scope of the present work. It is customary, in the international debate on intercultural education, to cite as a starting point of reference the definition of culture provided by the above cited 2001 *UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*, which states that:

> 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 2009: 403).

The CoE's *Framework of competences for democratic culture* (2018: 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. Cunha and Gomes (2009: 100) further emphasize the individual dimension by defining culture as "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). In summary, culture comprehends all the various resources that individuals and groups use to build frameworks of reference and to make sense of the world.

In the contemporary debate on intercultural education, an important caveat in defining culture is to avoid an essentialist perspective, i.e. to consider 'culture' or 'cultures' as monolithic blocks with strong ontological autonomy and fixed characteristics. Instead, especially in the context of intercultural education, culture is seen from a constructivist perspective, that is, it is conceived more as a 'process' in which participants are active actors in the creation, transmission and recreation of values, beliefs, practices and traditions, some of which may be of recent invention. Personal choices and negotiations according to contextual needs and constraints are factors in these dynamics. Also,

dimensions such as the social, economic, geographical and political ones should not be neglected or considered not inherent. In a nutshell, culture is inseparable from social and physical realities, and, above all, from those individuals which, in turn, are being at the same time both *influenced by* and *influencing* it (cfr. UNESCO 2013: 10, Sandu & Lyamouri-Bajja 2018: 15-6).

In addition to this dynamic and process-like aspect of culture, i.e. the change and development over time, there is also the issue of internal diversity. Any kind of social group, from citizens of a nation to professional organizations to local associations, can have its distinctive culture, which can 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 a given context characterized by a pool of cultural resources in the above-mentioned sense, 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 though time and context (CoE 2018: 29-30). In other words, not only there is internal variability, but this is affected by the way in which resources employed by groups could be contested or challenged, therefore making the boundaries of and between groups disputed and fuzzy.

What we have discussed up to this point involves also 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 (Sandu & Lyamouri-Bajja: 16-7. Cfr. also Remotti 1996). Individuals can and often have multiple identities and there are, moreover, multiple dimensions of identity (gender, class, age, occupation, nationality...) 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 the fluidity among them that, ultimately, enables intercultural dialogue (UNESCO 2013: 10). At the same time, however, it is important not to forget how people - individual or groups - often strive to maintain a solid and positive self-identity, usually employing different strategies like in-group and out-group distinctions (see e.g. Remotti 2010). Similarly, to affirm that cultural differences are socially irrelevant or collective identities "do not exist outside ethnic and nationalist ideologies would be intellectually indefensible" (Eriksen 2001: 66). Indeed, cultural diversity has always existed, and the question of how can we adequately manage it ultimately boils down to the choice of the typology of discourse we employ about cultural diversity. This discourse may be essentialist, multicultural or, as in our case, intercultural (Sandu & Lyamouri-Bajja: 18 ff). These are relevant factors for the conceptualization of interactions between cultural diversity. We turn now on these issues.

2.4.3 Intercultural interactions

Given the above discussed points, how can we conceptualize intercultural interactions? As a first observation, since cultures are internally multiple and complex, and since individuals have multiple identities and there are various interests or assumptions at works behind their will to interact, intercultural interactions may take place even in the same 'cultural group'. Even further, as each individual has its 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. I encounter a different culture through one of its artifacts that represents an aspect of this culture - these mediums/representations are ultimately made, or embodied, by individuals.

To elaborate further on this with the aid of the CoE's *Framework* (2018: 31), when we encounter other people, we could interact and respond to them as individuals, or we may as well engage them as representative of their cultural affiliations. That is, we group them together with other people by shifting our frame of reference from the individual and the interpersonal to the intercultural. There are various factors influencing this shift. First of all, what is pivotal is 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* that we use in order to make sense of this very otherness. In this situation - an "intercultural situation" - not only we tend to categorize the other person(s), but also ourselves as member of a cultural group, rather than as individuals.

Therefore, from this perspective, the *Framework* (*ib.*) suggests that the previous CoE definition of intercultural dialogue:

> Intercultural dialogue is an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures that leads to a deeper understanding of the other's global perception (CoE 2008a: 17),

should be retooled as:

> ... an open exchange of views, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect, between individuals or groups who *perceive themselves* as having different cultural affiliations from each other. (CoE 2018: 31, my italics).

On the base of this perception, and on the base of the type of discourse employed about cultural diversity, there can be, especially at the levels of the individual, 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, as we have seen in chapter 1, 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 incorporates new behaviors appropriate to different worldviews in a process of enrichment of previous cultural resources, it is called *adaptation*. Finally, in the *integration* stage, one has mastered various frames of reference than can be put in use in a highly contextual manner. Individual in these stages 'live between worlds'. This may not be a very comfortable position, but it is a very powerful one in terms of capacity of cultural mediation.

Certain present-day contexts and situations are deemed critically relevant to the issue of intercultural interactions and, consequently, to intercultural education (see e.g. Sandu & Lyamouri-Bajja 2018: 10-3). Starting with the case of Internet, it is commonly perceived nowadays how paradoxical is the two opposite potentials of the World Wide Web. On one had is extremely easy to learn about distant and marginal cultures and to stand up for common cause, such as through online campaigns. On the other hand, it is equally easy to for hate speech to spread, for simplified or distorted information to be disseminated in uncontrollable ways, and for those peculiar situations called "echo-chambers" (Quattrociocchi 2017) to grow strong. These latter are situation and context in which only information that confirms pre-existent bias is allowed and reinforced. All of this is also connected with the recent rising of populism, which I employ as a term indicating those modalities of discourse which "simplifies the political space by symbolically dividing society between 'the people' (as the 'underdogs') and its 'other'" (Panizza 2005: 3ff). That is, a polarizing discourse that often taps on strong emotions

and on identity rhetoric. Another two related issues in this regard are terrorism and immigration crisis. In the first case, contemporary terrorism phenomena have increasingly been leading to a peak rise in islamophobia and global bias towards Muslims, while constant mediatic exposition of the migration issue has been fueling a homogenizing image of refugees as inherently poor, uneducated and sometimes equated with terrorists (Sandu & Lyamouri-Bajja 2018: 12).

All these points could be grouped together around the keyword "stereotype". An important observation in this regard is that stereotypes are not inherently 'bad' and to be suppressed, but should be seen as a part of a larger process of categorization and abstraction, to be discussed and contextualized. Neuer (2012: 27-30) interestingly links stereotypes with the notion of "interim worlds". To put it simply, from a constructivist point of view, intercultural encounters are not understood as taking place *in vacuo*, but within the framework of our pre-existent "inner vision of otherness" that we generate in our imagination every time we engage with otherness, be it directly, or through media. In this way we establish an "interim world in which our own world and the world(s) of the others are interwoven" (29). However, if the categories of our own world are insufficient to "come to terms" with the world of the others, inside these 'interim worlds' we rearrange these others until they 'fit' with our own world. For example, we ignore and/or isolate the elements that we found disturbing. This means that the actual negotiation (acceptance or depreciation) takes place in these "interim worlds", of which both self-stereotypes and hetero-stereotypes are pillars. However, these interim worlds are also unstable and prone to change: if, in the first phase of the encounter, we rely heavily on our own categories, upon reception of new information or feedback, we may become aware that our interim worlds are open and flexible. One of the objectives of intercultural education is to foster the adequate competences required for this shift.

2.4.4 Aims of intercultural education

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. The first of these is essentialism, i.e. that culture are impermeable blocks unable to communicate. It is logically connected with the paradigm of assimilationism, i.e. that one of the sides has to lose its identity and merge with the other. Another paradigm to be overcome is the multicultural one, for the reasons already explained above. Intercultural education aims instead at engaging cultural diversity on the base of the complex conceptualizations of culture, cultures and intercultural interactions above discussed.

Among many examples, we can cite the following three main principles of intercultural education (cfr. Sandu & Lyamouri-Bajja 2018 and UNESCO 2013). The first is *valuing diversity*, not only in the sense of knowing about different cultures, but using this knowledge as resource for creating new meanings and new narratives, in line with the above mentioned concept of cultural diversity as an asset in 'ecological terms'. Valuing diversity means also 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, in order 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 judging other cultures. This last issue should not lend itself to an easy 'anything goes' discourse, but should be instead the starting point from which tackling seriously the problematic tension between cherishing diversity and working on common frame of reference, such as human rights.

The concrete outcomes expected from intercultural education can be variously listed. Among them there is the reduction of ethnocentric perspective, a willingness to fight prejudices and to promote respect for plurality and solidarity. It is expected also to foster more proactive behaviors 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" (Deardoff 2020: 5).

In order to fulfill these aims, intercultural education scholars and pedagogist have theorized, as expected results of intercultural teaching-learning activities, a series of competences that should be set and operationalized in concrete practices. For our discussion, competences should be understood as an equilibrated complex set of components of different nature (UNESCO 2013:12-6), including the cognitive, applicative, behavior-related and ethical domains. Examples of the first domain may be knowledge of one's own culture, knowledge of other cultures, but also of key contexts and processes such as cultural adaptation or ethnocentric or ethnorelative interpretations. Applicative competences (i.e. 'skills') may be 'basic', such as "analyzing", or 'advanced' such as "meta-communicative ability". In the behaviour-related domain, typical intercultural competences are attitudes such as curiosity and tolerance to ambiguity. On the ethical side, unsurprisingly, valuing and respecting human diversity is pivotal.

Many models of competence have been proposed (see 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.

I will discuss my own personal choice for a competences model in the conclusive chapter. For now, I limit myself to the issue of how fostering, in general terms, this kind of competences. Overall, authors agree that it has no sense nor efficacy to teach intercultural education as a classic school subject, but that it should be better understood as a general approach which informs the general and particular objectives of the school's curriculum, the methods used and the formation of teachers (see e.g. Perry & Southwell 2011: 457-9; Neuer 2012: 38-45; UNESCO 2013: 27-9, Portera 2013: 253-78, Deardoff 2020: 6-10). For example, school curricula may be drafted around key principles such as non-discrimination, pluralism and cultural relativism, and arranged in order to deliberately provide meaningful intercultural learning situations that give opportunities and the right contexts to engage cultural differences and to negotiate positions and views.

Giving the enormous richness of methods and approaches to foster intercultural competences, it is probably 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 in-depth and critical approaches are needed, approaches that elicit exploration of one's own stereotypes, bias and attitudes. In other words, a theorical/critical framework is needed also 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). This discussion leads to a series of interesting observations regarding pitfalls to be avoided through the application of a thoroughly critical self-analysis.

2.4.5 Pitfalls to be avoided in intercultural education

Probably, it could be said that the main risks in intercultural education are 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 *vs* tradition". The narrative of interculturality as interaction between cultures to create a new joint culture may involve 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, not correctly handling this issue may lead to the myth of the 'discovery' of 'isolated' people, which thus came to be represented as a-historical or semi-historical cultures. Similarly, the 'backwardness' of certain cultures or cultural traits may be uncritically objectified and used as a critique of European post-industrialization. In Aman's article this is exemplified by an informant positively describing the lifestyle in Kenya (9). It is easy to see how this kind of discourse follows the same logic of those orientalist discourses which image religions, especially those outside Europe, as a resource to counter 'western and modern malaise' (more on this in chapter 4).

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, which is supposed to be supported by intercultural competences, 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 (cfr. also Portera 2013:187-93). Indeed, intercultural dialogue, more often than not, does not take place in non-conflictual contexts or feature good-willing interlocutors (see e.g. Phipps 2014). The point is that, in tense situation, 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 assumption 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 thought of as taking place on blank canvas (cfr. *ib. passim* and Mansuri & Arber 2017).

While with "non-negotiable assumptions" we may refer to critical issues such as controversy over human rights, we may also refer to much more culture-bound values which could be erroneously taken as universal. To give a simplified example, an interlocutor A may implicitly posit pluralism, modernism and individualism as universally positive traits, while its interlocutor B may instead value hierarchy and group belonging. This leads to interesting observations by Bouma (2017) and Morris (2017) concerning the conceptualization of religion in various publications and supranational guidelines addressing intercultural education and dialogue. Bouma calls the idea of religions in these writings as "package religions", in that they are presented as basically hierarchical organized groups, with defined boundaries, often in competition, and featuring the common trait of having 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 follow more or less uniformly a set of belief and behavior, and often their identity is supposed to coincide with their religious belonging. It is clear that a protestant stereotype or 'Westphalian paradigm" is at work here, which overlooks many dimensions of religion\s and perpetuates itself in discourses on intercultural dialogue and education by treating religion as 'special thing' that required different approaches. Morris warns that reductively framing religions as "resources for 'the conception of the purpose of life'" (151-2), i.e. a philosophical stance with a focus on beliefs, makes them way too abstract and difficult to locate. Moreover, in this way religions are put outside the dynamic interplay between that nearly infinite variety of practices, commitment, and identities that characterizes nowadays super-diverse society. Conversely, treating religions, as done in some instances of intercultural education, only in their fashionable aspects such as food, festivals or dressing, neglects other important issues such as modality of expression, polygamy, crime and punishment, concept of good society, gender ideas, 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 more 'material' or 'unpleasant' aspects such as economy, politics, and in general power issues. If, as proposed above, intercultural education is mainly concerned about positively engaging and negotiating possible conflicts rising from natural cultural diversity, at the same time these conflicts cannot be conceived as merely "cultural". Instead, political, institutional and material factor must also be taken into account. In other words, intercultural education is also about "decoding power structure in society" (Sandu & Lyamouri-Bajja 2018: 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 (see e.g. Kirby 2010). This means that, if we address "intercultural dialogue" as one of our social practices of reference for our educational purposes (see

above 2.3.4), attention should be paid to the fact that, in real life situations, this dialogue is often carried out in a framework of asymmetrical power dynamics. Hardy and Hussein (2017: 68ff) point at such kind of problematic issues. For example, how are we supposed to discuss poverty and include in such discussion the poor ones, 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? However, Mansuri and Arber (2017) lament that, more often than not, important supranational documents on intercultural dialogue 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 to not neglect all those contexts which may engender, in intercultural situation, an "I-it" relation, that is, a human-subhuman asymmetrical relation in which the weaker interlocutor'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 or tense contexts. For example, there it can be a general sense of precariousness (e.g. economic crisis or mediatic over-exposure of refugees' migration) that may lead to obscure the multiple nature of the weaker interlocutor and simplify its identity.

In summary, systematic patterns of material disadvantage, discrimination, differentials in allocation of resources and opportunities may disempower certain groups, even if competent, from participating on equal footing. This should lead us to the observation that, as it has been suggested elsewhere (Neuer 2012: 31-3; Sandu & Lyamouri-Bajja 2018: 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 competence for democratic culture have been put forward by the Council of Europe (CoE 2018). 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. Some relevant examples are: a commitment to the rule of law and democracy, a commitment to public sphere, a commitment to peaceful conflict resolution, a respect of diversity, willingness to express own opinion, a commitment to majority decision, a commitment to minorities' rights protection, a willingness to engage in intercultural dialogue and a concern for sustainable well-being of human beings. It is important to note that, in this context, "citizens" indicates all those individuals affected by democratic decision-making and not only those who hold legal citizenship. Similarly, "citizenship" refers to the active engagement of citizens with democratic processes and institutions, exercising their rights and responsibilities and upholding two mutually necessary main principles. The first one is the principle of democracy, which means basically to give equality of treatment and of possibility. The second one

is the principle of intercultural dialogue, which means communication and comprehension through diversity. That is, being able to express one's own view to citizens with different cultural affiliations and being able to understand views of other citizens taking into account their various cultural affiliations. In a nutshell, the idea is to foster active participation in a democratic decision-making process which aims at an equal and sustainable well-being across any kind of diversity. I will discuss more in detail the framework of competences for democratic culture proposed by the Council of Europe in relation to my proposal of RE model in chapter 5.

2.5 Conclusion

In the sections above we have seen how the concept of "education" 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, more at the individual level, guiding trough a path 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 has been to focus, among the various disciplines of educational sciences, 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 wordings "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 administration as *savoirs 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 pivotal issues such as principles, methods and practices expected to effectively bring pupils towards the acquisition of desired competences. These issues include, among other, criteria through which individuating the components of a given knowledge relevant to the teaching of it; actual teaching methods or techniques; and practical reflections on the psychological mechanisms of learning.

Apart from these observations focused on the 'technicalities' of the teaching and learning phenomenon, coherently with the above-mentioned observation about the interrelatedness of the different dimensions of "education", we have 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, 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 and democratic active citizenship". Since the conceptualization of the

principles and methods concerning the acquisition of the competence required to perform such social practices are object of the scholarly discussion in the field of intercultural dialogue and intercultural education, we did a brief exploration of the main topics of such a field. Since we have seen how the practice of intercultural dialogue intersects with the whole institutional, political and economic context, I have proposed to further enlarge the educative 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. I will dwell further on the reasons for this move in the 5th chapter.

As I have done above for the chapter devoted to the "religion" side of RE, now is time to lay out the lines of analysis that will guide the upcoming discussion of RE models. To this task, the theory of DT reveals its usefulness: first of all, in these RE models, which is (or are) the scholarly knowledges taken as point of departure? Which kind of transformation the noosphere and - if examples are available - the teachers perform on these knowledges? Which contents are selected? Which are the general and particular objectives set? Which *forma mentis* relative to the selected knowledge is privileged? Which actors are involved in these processes? Is present any discussion or reflection concerning the actual teaching practices or the use of artifacts? How is the learning dimension, i.e. the point of view of the pupil, taken into account? To enlarge the scope of the questions, which idea of education in general is implicitly or explicitly endorsed by RE? 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?

CHAPTER 3 - RE MODELS, APPROACHES AND PRACTICES

3.1 General introduction to the topic and individuation of the case-study

As Jensen T. (2017b: 205) remarks, RE "comes in various shapes and each shape, besides, comes in various shades". Indeed, "Religious Education" is a very generic term that covers all kinds, often starkly different, of teaching religions at school. This applies also to a region undergoing increasing standardization such as the European Union, which is the focus of this section. From a certain point of view, we may say that there is a specific kind of RE for each country. This is because the relationship between school and religion is often closely connected with the relationship between state and church. As such, it is a matter of national sovereignty. From another point of view, we may even affirm that each individual RE performance may be peculiar in itself. For these reasons, scholars have come out with various models in order to find common trends among such empirical variability, applying in each case different criteria.

From an institutional perspective, i.e. referring to the legal framework and, especially, the position of the state vis-à-vis the religious communities involved, Willaime (2007) distinguishes, at least in Europe, three main kinds of RE: "1) *no religious instruction in school*; 2) *confessional religious instruction in school*; 3) *non-confessional religious education*" (60, a similar tripartition is employed also by Ferrari 2013).

The first type is peculiar to France where, due to the historical developments of state-church relationships and the emphasis on the principle of *laïcité*, there is no provision of time-table hours specifically devoted to religion (with the exception of the region of Alsace-Moselle). In 2002, however, recommendations from the so-called Debray report[26], triggered a development of a teaching about *faits religeux* within other subjects, notably history (Jensen T. and Kjeldsen 2014a).

The second type, *confessional religious instruction in school*, can be found in various European countries and consists of the teaching of one or few more specific religions, whose institutional representatives have stipulated a relevant agreement with states. This is the case, for example, of Portugal, the Netherlands, Poland, Austria, Belgium, Spain, Latvia, Luxembourg, and Italy. In these cases there is often one or 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

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[26] French intellectual Regis Debray (1940-) has been commissioned by then Minister of Education Jack Lang to draw a report concerning the place of religion in education within the framework of laïcité, and published a report entitled *L'Enseignement du fait religieux dans l'école laïque* (2002).

countries, such as Germany[27], the two predominant trends of Catholicism and Protestantism are often taught in an ecumenical modality (Willaime 2007: 60, Ferrari 2013: 101). Generally, this teaching is organized, managed, and controlled by the concerned religious community/ies (frequently in cooperation with the state). This means that the teachers are often trained and/or selected by the religious authorities, and even if it is the state which pays the teacher, s/he needs the authorization of the concerned religious authorities. Similarly, religious communities have often a role in the creation and selection of syllabi, textbooks and contents in general. Confessional religious instruction is not necessarily limited to theological and doctrinal matters of the tradition of reference (e.g. in Poland, see Zielińska and Zwierżdżyński 2013), but there is also a growing trend in denominational teachings to include elements of other religions, which are nonetheless engaged from the point of view of the tradition of reference (e.g. in Spain, Italy, and Catholic RE in the French region of Alsace-Moselle) (Ferrari 2013: *ib.*). In all European countries where confessional instruction is provided the principle of freedom of religion and thought is enacted by leaving to pupils or their parents the decision whether to attend or not (Jensen T. 2017a: 52). A few countries also offer alternative subjects for these pupils, for example some German *länder* provide courses such as *Werte und Normen* in Lower Saxonia and *Ethik* in Bavaria (Alberts 2007: 331-2).

The third type, *non-confessional religious education,* is mostly used in reference to 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: 337ff) and recently also by Switzerland. This latter, in the perspective of an harmonization of educational politics among cantons, has issued national plans in which the past denominational or interreligious teaching with opt-out possibility shifted to a teaching designed for all pupils under the frame of human and social sciences (Bleisch, Desponds, Durisch Gauthier, Frank 2015: 13-5). Generally, this type of RE is organized, managed, and controlled by the state, which is in charge of the training, selection, appointment, dismissal, and remuneration of teachers, without any need of authorization from religious authorities. Similarly, the state is in charge of the definition of curricula, syllabi or approval of textbooks. Apart a few exceptions, these subjects are compulsory for all students, albeit in some cases (e.g. England) there is an opting-out possibility, irrespectively to the self-declared non-confessional nature of RE. Being non-confessional does not mean, however, that cooperation with religious communities and institutions cannot take place. On the contrary, as we

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[27] It should be noted, furthermore, that federal countries such as Germany too have often different systems for each different states or *Länder*. In Bavaria, for example, the traditional Catholic Church and the Lutheran-Protestant (Evangelische Kirche) have been additionally supplemented with (Christian) Orthodox confessional RE ('Ortodoxe Religionslehre'), Jewish confessional RE ('Israelitische Religionslehre'), Old-Catholic RE ('Alt-Katolische Religionslehre'), and Islamic RE ('Islamischen Unterricht') (Jensen T. & Kjeldsen 2014b: 14).

will see (3.2.1), in England the representatives of religious traditions, at both local and national level, do partake in the *noosphere* especially in the creation of syllabi. Furthermore, the non-confessional character of RE does not prevent the historically predominant religions to have a privileged treatment in terms e.g. of timetabled hours and general approach. On this regard it should be noted that in institutional documents there is an explicit mention of the special status of Christianity, especially in terms of cultural heritage[28].

These last observations show that classification from an institutional perspective does not depict entirely the differences or exhaust the peculiarities of the various types of RE. Shifting the criteria from legal framework to e.g. baseline educational aims, curricula's contents or actual practices and contents, we can have different classifications of RE provided by various scholars.

One of the most used classifications (originally proposed in Grimmitt 1973, cfr. *inter alia* Giorda & Saggioro 2011: 131-2, 178-9) refers to the basic educational strategy of RE, which may be divided in three main orientations: "learning into religion", "learning from religion" and "learning about religion". The first one often overlaps with the confessional institutional framework and aims to introduce the pupils into 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 developing a factual knowledge of a certain tradition or number of traditions, usually from an academic, non-confessional perspective. "Learning from religion" is a bit more ambiguous (see e.g. discussion in 3.6 *infra*) 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. It has to be noted that these three ideal types do not have to be mutually exclusive: as we will see *infra*, English RE has always been trying to balance between "learning about" and "learning from". Also, as noted above, even institutionally confessional-RE may aim to offer knowledge about other religions, albeit with the high risk of applying theological filters.

Frank and Bochinger (2008), on the base of field-work analysis of real practices, 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

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[28] Concerning England, see *infra* 3.1.1; concerning Sweden see Alberts 2007: 218, ch. 3 *passim* and Berglund: 2013. For Denmark see Jensen T. & Kjeldsen 2013 and Andreassen 2013 for Norway.

that ultimately pupils are supposed to repeat a dogmatic interpretation considered valid for all pupils ("we"). In "life-world-related RE" the objects of teaching-learning are framed within the pupils' life-world [29] 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 differ among each pupil). However, pupils work only with their frames or at least they are presented with just their classmates' frames. Frank and Bochinger observe that there are, nonetheless, some similarities to the "dogma-related RE" practices, insofar very often teachers that employ "life-world-related RE" approach presuppose that all humans have a basic religious orientation, in the sense that every religious symbol can be meaningfully linked to the inner world of pupils, who can thus express themselves through these symbols. Indeed, for Frank and Bochinger, these two forms pertain to more general *religiöse Unterricht*. What pertains instead to the *religionskudlichler Unterricht* is the last "Culture studies-related RE" form, in which the discourses employ a "they-position", entailing, among other things, that not every religious object is meaningful for everyone. Instead, by comparing e.g. different narratives from religious traditions or different life-styles of religious persons, teachers guide pupils to create more general framing, such as analytical concept of "theory of cosmogony and anthropogony". Alternatively, teachers may offer the social or historical context as the frames in which inserting and studying e.g. the relevance of a religious building.

Jensen T. and Kjeldsen (2014), with a focus on curricular contents and teachers' education, plus a suspicious eye towards REs that institutionally self-define as non-confessional, 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, continues 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" (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

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[29] Frank and Bochinger (198 n. 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', cfr. Dreher 2011.

'less modern' traditions, notably Islam (195-200). Tim Jensen (2017b) includes in this category not only the above cited "life-world-related RE" but he suggests that such label may be used also with some examples of alternative subjects, such as the above cited *Werte und Normen* in Lower Saxonia. He argues that this subject, even if grounded in non-theological disciplines, in its aims of providing a moral code *in substitution*, to the one provided by confessional RE, may be classified as a sort "small-c confessional RE", (215-7, 221-2), in the sense - my interpretation - of promoting a form of civil religion.

Pajer (2014) proposes three main ideal 'paradigms' or 'polarizations' that resume in a coherent way the various dimensions that characterize RE: the very *raison d'être* of the teaching, the social contexts, the legal framework, the epistemological base(s), the educational aims and approaches, the teacher training, etc. It must be noted that these paradigms are not mutually exclusive and may often coexist in single national RE instances, but each paradigm differs for its peculiar focus. The first one is called "political-concordatarian" (*politico-concordatario*) and refers to a teaching fundamentally aimed to the transmission of the doctrinal and moral contents of the historically dominant religion. The social context is generally understood in a national or mono-cultural perspective, and there can be an overlapping of aims between national identity formation and religious instruction. There is a legal agreement between state and the religious institution, which often has a role in creating curricula and training teachers, who act as religious models and teach on a theological base. The second paradigm is called "academic-curricular" (*accademico-curriculare*) and refers to a teaching fundamentally aimed at increasing the knowledge of religions as a cultural component of society. The social context is generally understood as that of a modern, secular society, with a transnational perspective. The provision of RE is under full management of the state, which trains teachers and creates curricula on the epistemological base of historical and social-anthropological approaches to religion\s. The third paradigm is called "ethics/values-based" (*etico-valoriale*) and refers to a teaching fundamentally aimed at fostering social cohesion and upholding the dignity of the individual. The social context is generally understood as that of a modern, post-Christian but also post-secular society, with an emphasis on both pluralization and globalization of worldviews. The fundamental legal frameworks working behind this kind of RE can be found in the various supranational charters, especially regarding human rights, protection of minorities and promotion of dialogue and democracy. The epistemological base is much more heterogeneous than the previous paradigms, as it includes, apart from the fundamental human rights framework, various themes and topics taken from religion as ethical/existential/ 'spiritual' resources plus methods and practices of intercultural dialogue. As principal actors in this kind of RE we can find both secular institutions and religious/interreligious institutions, often in cooperation.

This last paradigm is increasingly influent, especially on a supranational, European scale. Indeed, T. Jensen too, in addition to what discussed above, highlights this paradigm as 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,[30] 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 (cfr. Jackson 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. Therefore, in order to support the development of said identities within a framework of respect of human rights, and to foster the social/cultural inclusion of various cultural and religious groups (and the individuals therein), 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 debating between different religious/ideological positions, with the aim of constructively comparing and contrasting different views, concerning especially themes such as social justice, peace and human rights (see Jackson 2004: 114-7 and Alberts 2007: 332-5). We will see some examples of this kind of RE also in English context (see *infra* 3.3). 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 T. 2017a: 54). Continuing with the example of Hamburg, it must be noted that, 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), the theological frame of this model 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-

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[30] Among prominent supranational institutions and documents concerning these topics, we may cite the Council of Europe (CoE) and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODHIR) of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The first institution issued important documents such as the *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* (CoE 2008a) which stresses, *inter alia*, the importance of the knowledge of nonreligious convictions and their role in society (30-31, 43-4). Similarly, the OSCE/ODHIR published in 2007 the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (OSCE 2007), aimed at offering guidance for all member states that choose to promote the study and knowledge about religions and beliefs in schools, in particular within the framework of human rights (notably freedom of religion and belief) and with the perspective of reducing harmful misunderstanding and stereotypes (12). Cfr. on these topics Jackson 2008a and Jensen T. and Kjeldsen 2014c.

C Confessional RE". The presence of this and other biblical themes can be very problem given the *integrative* character with which this RE present itself (Alberts 2007: 334-5). This leads us to the next RE classification.

Another way of classifying RE has been proposed by authors such as Pye (2002) and Alberts (2007) and revolves around the analytical term "integrative religious education", which refers to a school subject in which children of a class learn together and are not separated on the base of their religious affiliation, as it happens in multi-denominal RE systems such as in various German *Länder*, or in mono-denominational RE systems with opt-out possibility such as in Spain or Italy. These latter are thus classified as "separative religious education" and basically correspond to Willaime's *confessional religious instruction*. More in detail, "Integrative", for Alberts refers to two distinctive aspects: 1) taking religious plurality, both in school and in society in general, as its starting point and requiring thus theories and methods to deal with such diversity; 2) "making various religions as the subject matter without taking the perspective of any of these religions as an overall framework" (2007: 1). A sub-type of integrative religious dimension is further added, which is "Integrative RE as a 'learning dimension'" (345) and refers to those situations in which topics and themes concerning religions are treated as a learning dimension of various other subjects. This is the case of the above cited teaching of *faits religeux* in France and of the institution of the obligatory learning area called *Geestelijke Stromingen* ("spiritual traditions") in the educational system of the Netherlands (347-54).

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From such a wide variety of RE models and classification, I choose to take as the analytical term of reference the "integrative RE" as described above by Alberts. The aim of the present study is to individuate 'do's and don'ts' in non-confessional RE when East Asian religious traditions are taken into consideration. Therefore, focusing on "Integrative RE" is, on one hand, narrow enough, as it clearly indicates a teaching that should be open to anyone and that is meant to engage contemporary religious plurality from a neutral perspective. On the other hand, it is broad enough to include various dimensions, such as participation of both secular and religious actors (collective as well as individual), or a range of theories, practices and provisions that may be classified as "life-world-related", "cultural studies-related", "learning about", "learning from", even "small C-confessional".

As Alberts and others observe (Alberts 2007: 2, 5; Cush 2016: 54; RE Council 2017: 33), the European countries which have pioneered such kind of Integrative RE are England[31] and Sweden.

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[31] The reason why England is taken into consideration instead of the whole U.K. 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

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 (see more below 3.2.1). The beginning of Sweden 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 base, which subsequently developed in the present-day *religionskunskap* ("knowledge of religions") (Alberts 2007: 221-5).

In what follows I will focus on English integrative RE for various reasons. First of all, 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, and 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 U.K. but is considered as one of the main international academic forum concerning issues of education and religion.[32] 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 (see more on 3.2.1) and scholars such as Robert Jackson, probably the most renowned RE scholar in European context and beyond. As we will deal more in detail with his work *infra* (3.3), it suffices here to say that, for example, in the Council of Europe (CoE 2008b)'s *Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)12 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education,* - to which Jackson cooperated - the § 7.2 "Various learning methods" basically cites RE approaches pertaining 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".[33] 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" (see more *infra* 3.3.1). 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*

Wales, its state-maintained school system is close to that of England but has been increasingly diverging since 2006 (Jackson 2013: 2).

[32] An influential publication at supra-national level such as the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (OSCE/ODHIR 2007) explicitly cite this journal as a reliable source of professional and scholarly information on RE (41, note 48).

[33] Some or very similar discussion of RE approaches can be seen in other CoE publications such as Keats 2007 and Jackson 2014.

Dialogue or a factor of Conflict in transforming societies of European Countries (REDCO), which explicitly draw from the interpretative approach (see REDco Project 2009: 18-20).

At any rate, apart from the Interpretative approach, it should be noted that the English RE debate involve 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 deep a fairly number of those "shapes and shades" of RE that may be classified 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 academic ones 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 to address questions such as what should constitute the core of the subject, what its overarching goals ought to be, leaving these issues to the national, centralized curriculum (Dalevi & Niemi 2015; 2016). As a matter of fact, several Swedish universities use international material, notably from England, in their teacher education programmes for teaching RE didactics (*ib.* 2016: 77-8, cfr. 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.

3.1.1 Model for analysis

Let us bring together and reformulate what, in the previous chapters, have been individuated as the lines of analysis to be applied to RE theories, models and practices. For the sake of simplicity, I have regrouped the various questions in two macro areas, "religion" 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 taken into account?

How religion\s is 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 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 sub-traditions, and the

historical character and development of religion. Also, the language used will be examined (cfr. e.g. the use of 'water' metaphors by Tweed in par. 1.6). 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? Or, in other words, how the dialectic between universality and particularity, i.e. the need to generalize and at the same time to preserve diversity, is 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 religion\s include economy-related issues such as halal-products market or Islamic finance, an adequate epistemological perspective is needed. In general, under this key-topic the question is: how religions should 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? How 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\s. Are "religions" taken as natural entities or their complexities and discursive genealogies are engaged and connected to Euro-American historical background? Are power-related issues tackled?

This last, more 'ethically oriented' question leads us to the "education" area with its two key-topics. I call the first *didactic transposition*, and it consists in asking which is (or are) the scholarly knowledges taken as reference for RE. What kind of transformation these knowledges 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(s) of reference? Which *forma mentis* 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 into 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, e.g. in the sense of *Bildung*, will be examined, but also the more didactics-related elements, such as the actual teaching practices or the use of artifacts or the way in which that learning dimension, i.e. the point of view of the pupil, is taken into account.

3.2 English RE: historical context and institutional framework
3.2.1 Short history of English RE

Historically, religions were the primary providers of free education in England as well as in the whole U.K. In the nineteenth century, the Church of England was managing the highest number of schools offering education to the children of who could not afford private schooling, followed by Catholics, Methodists and Quakers. Churches 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 established first LEAs (local education authority) in place of school boards, as local government bodies. In this way most denominational schools were then 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, given the historical precedents, there has been a long tradition of state funds made available to many religiously-run education establishments. 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). However, the right of the parents to withdraw their children from both collective worship and religious instruction dates from 1870 and was reinforced by this Act. Concerning the contents of this "religious instruction", LEAs were required to convene ASCs (agreed syllabus conference) to produce RE syllabus 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 the representative of teachers. To support ASCs, LEAs were given the power, but nor required, to establish SACREs (Standing Council on RE). Even if ACs and SACREs are two different legal bodies, in practice the persons involved have been mostly the same (70).

As hinted above, at this time RE was still about (and named as) "religious instruction" on a Christian base. However, during the 1960s and 1970s, academic debate started to engage with issues of religious education in correlation with other social factors, particularly secularisation and the increasing religious diversity within society. In 1969 the *Shap[34] Working Party for World Religions in Education*, a group comprising both RE and religious studies professionals, was founded in order 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). His

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

ideas were particularly significant at this time, especially those expressed in influent works such as *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion* (1968) and the *Working Paper 36* (1971) of the Schools Council. Smart criticized confessional RE and called for a RE analogous to academic religious studies, which at that time were mainly based on phenomenology. Amon his recommendations, he suggested the following: to enlarge the range of religions to be studied, by appealing to the concept of "world religions"; to employ phenomenology bracketing; to consider moral education not as the main task of RE; and to think of this latter as the provision of knowledge of religions and relations between religions and cultures, to be used when discussing sensitively religious claims (Alberts: 2007: 88-94). Similarly, as Cush suggests (2016: 56-7), contemporary liberal protestant theological thought, as that expounded e.g. by John Hick (1922-2012), though the proposal of a pluralistic theology in which God is at the center of each religious tradition, also offered a further teoretical underpinning for multi-faith education, albeit not strictly non-confessional. Another key development, according to Jackson and O'Grady (2007: 193) has been the reflections of Harold Lukes (1912-80) who, in the early 1960s, considered that "religious instruction" should be focused on the relevant existential problems of the pupils, instead of doctrinal matters.

All these ideas proven influential and in 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 experiment 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 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 also 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 been translated and disseminated also outside England, e.g. in Italy (see Salvarani 2006).

With the 1988 Education Reform Act, for the first time a National Curriculum was enacted. However, it did not include RE, partly because local determination was already well established, and partly because of the right of withdrawal. This Act included significant changes to the nature of RE. First, 'religious instruction' was changed into 'religious education', meaning a shift from a transmission of religious beliefs to a RE concerned with the understanding of religions and of their impact on society. Secondly, a multi-faith character was enshrined in law for the first time, with changes in the composition of SACREs and in the direct legislation about the content of agreed syllabuses, albeit maintaining a noteworthy consideration of the British Christian heritage. This Act

contained in fact the often-quoted phrase which states that agreed syllabuses "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, quoted in Jackson 2013: 125). SACREs' committees' composition too was officially enlarged with the inclusion of members of other religions, maintaining however the separation between the committee of the Church of England and the committee formed by all other religions, thus granting to the former a greater voting power.

In 1994 the SCAA (School Curriculum and Assessment Authority) issued two non-statutory National Model Syllabuses to be either implemented as they were, edited, or simply ignored. 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 the *Non-statutory national framework for religious education* published in 2004 by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA 2004). This too gained wide currency and was influential in the development of many locally agreed syllabuses (RE Council 2017: 31). This document frames RE within the two general educational aims of the National School Curriculum, namely: the provision of opportunities for all pupils to learn and achieve and the promotion of "pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development" (QCA 2004: 8), this latter being a very often element cited in RE literature. Other noteworthy features are the recommendation to give the opportunity to study 'secular philosophies such as humanism' and the recommendation that by the end of key stage 3[35] pupils should have encountered all five religions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism in sufficient depth. Christianity should be studied throughout each key stage. The National Framework also links religious education with the themes of intercultural understanding and citizenship education.

In 2012 the Department for Education carried out a review of the whole National Curriculum, which did not affect RE. In an effort to keep in line with the indication at national level, the RE Council, a body founded in 1973 which acts as the umbrella body for RE with over 60 member organizations involved in RE, published in 2013 *A Review of Religious Education in England* which included an updated non-statutory framework of RE. In this new document we find again the linkage of RE to the transversal educational objective - slightly changed - of the promotion of "the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development" (REC 2013:12). In place of the previous "learning

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[35] The different key stages (KS) in English education are: KS 1 (year 1 and 2, age 5-7), KS 2 (year 3-6. age 7-11), KS 3 (year 7-9, age 11-14), KS 4 (year 10-11, age 14-16), followed by the post-16 non-compulsory education (year 12-13), informally labeled KS 5.

about" and "learning from" attainment targets, three general aims are proposed: 1) "to know about and understand a range of religions and worldviews"; 2) "to express ideas and insights about the nature, significance and impact of religions and worldviews; 3) "to gain and deploy the skills needed to engage seriously with religions and worldviews" (14).

Starting from 2004, the governmental body in charge of monitoring the compliance of local educational institutions and schools to national standards, the *Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills* (Ofsted) issued some reports on RE's status in England (e.g. Ofsted 2004a and 2013) which highlighted a series of weaknesses in the present RE situation, such as the highly variable quality among the locally agreed syllabuses, low standards in achievements, confusion over the aims of RE and lack of relevant qualification among RE teachers. For these reasons, in 2016 a Commission on religious education (CoRE) was established and appointed to review the legal framework of the subject. It published a report in 2018 entitled *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward. A national plan for RE* (CoRE 2018), whose recommendations suggest some quite substantial changes from the present situation: first of all, the name should change into "Religion and Worldviews" to underline how the use of the concept of worldview has become pivotal in this new RE, and how also non-religious worldview ought to be addressed along with the religious one. A more centralized approach is recommended by proposing a set of organizing principles, called "National Entitlement to the study of religion\s and Worldviews", upon which programmes of study ought to be developed and that should be statutory for all publicly funded schools. This measure goes along with the removement of the requirement for local authorities to convene Agreed Syllabus Conferences and develop locally agreed syllabuses, and the transformation of the SACREs into "Local Advisory Network for Religion and Worldviews".

As anticipated above (3.1), the interplay between central recommendations and local implementation, plus a longstanding academic tradition of RE debates, produced quite a number of different RE theories, methodologies and practices. I have individuated six influential authors who, in my view, can be seen as embodying three main 'trends' or 'approaches' in English RE. I label these latter "Interpretive-dialogical", "Rational-theological", "Existential-instrumental". This choice of words partly corresponds to the self-understanding of these authors and their approaches, and partly reflect my own interpretation of their perspectives. While many other authors may have been considered, I limited my selection so to make room for a close reading of their works in order to grasp relevant elements and insights for my discussion in the next chapters. I will apply to their works the above discussed model of analysis (3.1.1).

Before, however, I will analyze in the same way also the above-mentioned official documentation issued at central level, highlighting the elements relevant to our discussion on RE, that are: concepts

and representations of religion\s, the epistemological underpinning, issues from a didactic transposition point of view and the general educational perspectives. I will start from the 2004 Non-statutory national framework for religious education, since its key concepts such as "learning about", "learning from" and "spiritual, moral, social and cultural development" are, as we will see, still relevant in the debate among RE specialists. Although at date it has not been adopted by the U.K. government, also the last 2018 report is worthy to be analyzed because it represents a highly considered contribution in the RE debate in England, coming from an institutional source. Before proceeding, a short methodological note: I think it is useful to focus, in my analysis of these documents, especially on what concerns the first (KS 1) and the last key stage (KS 5), as in KS1 we are likely to find those elements that deemed more central or important to be addressed since the early year of schooling, and in KS5 we are likely to find the ideal results of a complete RE process.

3.2.2 The 2004 non-statutory national framework for religious education

In this 2004 documents we do not find an explicit treatment of the concept of religion in itself. However, it is possible to identify some relevant information, e.g. from general recommendation concerning the "learning about" attainment target (cfr. QCA 2004: 11). According to this document, 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" (*ib.*) 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?'" (*ib.*, n. 3). An idea of religion, then, that sees them as a kind of 'reservoir' of theological-existential answers that informs also other domains of human thinking and practice, like philosophy, ethics, arts and science (cfr. 30). Indeed, such "important concepts, experiences and beliefs" are deemed "at the heart of religious and other traditions and practices" (14).

On these premises, it logically follows that propositional beliefs occupy the main position in the representation of religions offered. KS 1 pupils 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 KS 3 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), but is to be also noted that at this stage themes include issues of truth in science-religion relationship and what different religions "say about" (*ib.*) human rights, health, wealth, war, interfaith dialogue etc. I want to stress how we are in front of an underlying a-historical and monolithic conception of religions as different, precise sets of propositions concerning issues such as e.g. health or war. Indeed, an indication to the inner variability within religious

traditions seems hinted only for KS 4 and KS 5 pupils, who should "investigate issues of diversity within and between religions" (30). Concerning the historical dimension of religions, the only hint in this regard refers to the recognition of the fact that the "impact of religion and beliefs on different communities and societies has changed over time" (37), but this is considered an exceptional level of attainment - that is, not necessary.

Consistently with the lack of explicit conceptualization of religion, the epistemological underpinnings too are not clearly presented, and the impression is that also this aspect follows some kind of theological-existential approach. This can be surmised by the fact that one of the main educative contribution of RE is in the domain of "spiritual, moral, social and cultural development", to be gained through "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). In KS 5 it is recommended that pupils evaluate the "principal methods by which religion and spirituality are studied" (30), but without further indications. Instead, at this stage pupils are expected to use "religious, moral and philosophical vocabulary" (*ib*.), which may suggest that the chosen epistemological bases come from philosophy (including moral philosophy) and from the various religious tradition themselves. Indeed, given the conception of religion as an 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.

Such configuration is also coherent from the point of view of didactic transposition: as hinted in the above section, this 2004 document (and also the 2013 *Review* discussed in the next section) refers to a legal framework in which the contents and methods of RE are, ultimately, to be decided at local level through the deliberation of SACREs and ACs, which are formed by four groups: 1) the Church of England; 2) other Christian denominations and other religious institutions or groups that should reflect the local religious plurality; 3) teacher associations; and 4) local educational authorities. In other words, at the level of the *noosphere*, the *savoirs* taken into account are, on one side, those of the insiders/practitioners of religious traditions, and on the other, those of the educational specialists/practitioners. This does not mean that other kind of specialists, representative of other *savoirs*, do not enter in this process of external DT. For example, we know from the 2004 *Non-statutory framework* itself that, apart from religious groups such as the Church of England, the ISKCON Educaton Service, the Catholic Education Service, the Buddhist Society and many others, the British Humanist Society and Association for University Lecturers in Religion and Education (AULRE) have also been consulted. However, in the decision-making processes of ACs, only the four groups named above have right to vote. Given this situation, we can see how it is more appropriate to label the English RE as 'multi-faith' instead of strictly non-confessional, as the only

legal provision is that it "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). As a result, even if there are few mentions concerning those *savoirs* specialized with religion as their objects of study, we have less didactic transpositions of those 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*, in the sense of a fairly coherent set of knowledges and practices to be addressed more or less directly, without the mediation of any theories or methods. If any lens, so to speak, is applied, it could be labeled, as already cited above, as 'theological-existential'. In fact, these cognitive competences are supposed to be applied in close connection with the "learning from religion". That is, on the base of their learning about religion, pupils are then expected to develop "reflection on and response to their own and others' experiences", and to develop their "own ideas, particularly in relation to questions of identity and belonging, meaning, purpose and truth, and values and commitments" (11).

Such 'theological-existential' approach can be surmised also from the general education (more in a sense of *Bildung*) perspective of the documents, which does not lack, however, also *Erziehung*-oriented elements, especially in reference to citizenship education. In the 2004 document we can read that pupils, while learning different religions, beliefs and values are expected to explore also 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 their own identity, beliefs, moral and spiritual ideas and sharing them without fears. This is linked also to the objective of "recognising their own uniqueness as human beings and affirming their self-worth" (13). Other noteworthy 'theological-existential' educative outcomes expected are the acknowledgment that "knowledge is bounded by mystery" and the development of a "sense of wonder at the world in which they live" and of the "capacity to respond to questions of meaning and purpose" (*ib.*). From a perspective of *Erziehung* or socialization, RE is expected also to nurture social, intercultural and citizenship-related skills. It is supposed to reach this goal by promoting the importance of resolving in a fair way conflicts in spiritual, moral, social and cultural issues, by enabling pupils to justify and defend personal opinions on these issues (cfr. 15) and, more in general, by having them "being sensitive to the feelings and ideas of others" and being "ready to value difference and diversity for the common good" (13).

3.2.3 The 2013 *Review of Religious Education in England*

As in the previous document, no explicit definition of religion is offered in this reviewed framework. We can nonetheless reconstrued it from certain statements. We read in fact that the RE contributes 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", and that in 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" (REC 2013:14). In summary, religions seem to be implicitly defined as answers - mainly propositional but also practical - to common "challenging questions". Such answers, it is further specificied, are expressed "in coherent systems or ways of seeing the world" made up by "belief, teachings and sources of wisdom and authority including experience" (cfr. 25).

This implicit conceptualization is consistent with the representations proposed. In KS 1 pupils are expected to learn about beliefs and practices such as festivals and worship. A certain importance is given to the exploration of what are called "sources of wisdom", which include key texts such as the Bible, the Torah and the Bhagavad Gita, and the teachings of key leaders and key thinkers from different traditions and communities such as the Buddha, Jesus Christ, the Prophet Muhammad, Guru Nanak and humanist philosophers (cfr. 14). Therefore, KS1 pupils begin to engage these 'sources' starting with the "moral value of stories" (25), while advanced pupils in KS3 or KS4-5, through a deeper study of belief and practiced, should focus on the investigation of "the influence and impact of religions and worldviews" (28) on both individuals and groups, with a special emphasis on the key leaders, thinkers or founders of religions or worldviews. It is worth noting a better focus on the question of diversity and inner variability. Indeed, among the overall aims of RE it is explicitly claimed that knowledge about religions and worldviews includes also "recognising the diversity which exists within and between communities and amongst individuals" (14, my italics).

In summary, not differently from the 2004 documents, this framework is still based on a conception and representation of religion which uphold an idea of religious traditions as having mainly a propositional nature. That is, being constituted primarily 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. A stronger emphasis on diversity is present, however, together with the constant recommendation of including also non-religious worldviews. Concerning the epistemological underpinnings, we find both continuity and discontinuity with the previous framework.

Indeed, a general "theological approach", in the sense of philosophical reflections on metaphysical issues 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, my italics). More specifically KS1 pupils should "think about and respond to 'big questions'" (20), while KS 4-5 pupils should consider "theological questions about truth that arise, giving reasons for the ideas they hold" (26). In general, pupils are expected to engage personally and existentially with "key concepts and questions of belonging, meaning, purpose and truth, responding creatively" (25). For example, it is suggested that "linking to Science, students examine arguments about questions of origins and purpose in life (Where do we come from? Why are we here?)" (27).

The novelty, however, can be seen in the more explicit reference to disciplines that engage with a positive study of religion\s, in the sense of producing second-order knowledge about an object, that is, religions as social facts. KS 1 pupils should start by using certain key words (e.g. 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). The aims of these approaches are to enable pupils to "explain reasonably their ideas about how beliefs, practices and forms of expression influence individuals and communities" (67), that is, to become ' chercheur en herbe' (cfr. above 2.3.4) and try to theorize and gauge the social impacts of religious traditions. Furthermore, we also read the noteworthy suggestion to make RE also an occasion 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). That is, more explicitly, to "consider and evaluate the question: what is religion? Analyze the nature of religion using the main disciplines by which religion is studied" (67). From a contemporary study-of-religion\s approach, there are some elements susceptible of critical analysis, like the suggestion of using ideas from phenomenological approaches to the study of religion\s and beliefs in order to tackle arguments which engage "profoundly with moral, religious and spiritual issues" (28). Similarly, other questionable suggestions invite to inquire about the impact of "spiritual experiences (such as sensing the presence of God, or the experience of answered prayer)" (25), or to see weather "religion and spirituality are similar or different" (26).[36]

Nonetheless, these recommendations do represent quite 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 quite be a reflection of a changed composition in the *noosphere* out of which this document has been

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[36] I address the (false) question of religion and spirituality below (4.2.4).

issued. We read in fact that the composition of REC, as of October 2013, includes also bodies with ties with the academic study of religion\s, such as the British Association for the Study of religion\s (BASR) and the Independent Schools Religious Studies Association (2). Also, since this review represents an answer to previous Ofsted reports, it is highly probable that it took into account this recommendation to shift from theological approaches to more social sciences-based ones:

> RE cannot ignore the social reality of religion. Most of the issues in the RE curriculum for secondary pupils have been about ethical or philosophical matters, such as arguments about the existence of God, or debates, from a religious perspective, about medical ethics or the environment. It has been unusual to find questions about religion's role in society, changing patterns of religion in the local community, or the rise and decline of religious practice. It now needs to embrace the study of religion\s and society. (Ofsted 2007)

Even if they are not explicitly used as technical terms anymore, we may say that "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 of 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, that is, religions are engaged less as an object of study and more as an occasion to reflect on moral or metaphysical issues. In fact, it is again affirmed that RE "offers distinctive opportunities to promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development" (15). For example, KS 1 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), or are invited to "consider responses to genocide from different religions, for example studying the thought, theology and activism of Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in response to Nazism" (*ib*.).

From the point of view of intercultural and citizenship education, at KS 1 it is suggested to start fostering 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 (cfr. 20). Subsequently, already at KS3, it is suggested that engagement 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).

3.2.4 The 2018 Report *Religion and Worldviews: the way forward*

As hinted in a previous section (3.2.1.), the recommendations of the Commission on Religious Education (CoRe) do propose some quite innovative measures to be taken concerning RE planning and implementation, starting from the very name of the subject, which should change from "Religious Education" to "Religion and Worldviews".[37] This change of name is not meant to reflect only an explicit indication to include also non-religious worldviews as a core subject matter, but also a changed approach towards the subject matter itself. That is, it is sharply evident a concern over the problematic nature of the concepts of 'religion' and 'worldviews' and a subsequent attempt to address it as a necessary theoretical step.

In other words, differently from the previous documents, we are provided with a definition of religions, or, to be more precise, a definition of "worldview" of which religions are conceived as a sub-genre. 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)

And 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 sometimes embedded in institutions, are defined "institutional worldviews", which generally include what are normally called "religions", such as Christianity, Hinduism and so on, 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 but drawing their ideas from one or many of these worldviews, both consciously

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[37] For the sake of brevity and to avoid further acronyms, I will still refer to the educative practice proposed in this document as RE.

and not. In this regard it is acknowledged that interactions between individuals and institutions/communities/religions/cultures/traditions 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).

The issue of complexity is reiterated in various occasions and the concept of worldview is highly problematized. 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).

Such emphasis on complexity does not mean that some propositional definitions are not put forward. Worldviews are said to be made up not only of belief and practice, but also of "rituals, narratives, experiences, interactions, social norms, doctrines, artistic expressions and other forms of cultural expression" (72). Also, concerning what we may call the issue of distinctiveness in a theory of in a definition of religion/worldview (cfr. above 1.6), we may find it in 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, behaviour and practice" (*ib.*) of the various social phenomena. The shift from the more detailed 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 religious or not. We are told that distinction between religious and nonreligious worldviews is "not as clear-cut as we might have thought" (30). This is because individuals who identify as non-religious might still hold beliefs or undertake practices associated with particular religions, or vice-versa, individuals self-proclaiming religious may not embrace straightforwardly the main tenets of their traditions and draw from other non-religious worldviews. The use of term "religion" by this document seems to rely on the self-definition of institution and individuals addressed. In other words, if historical traditions such as Christianity and others, as well as single individuals, keep using the term "religion", this allows for the use of the term in RE (cfr. 73).

Such emphasis on complexity logically influences the issue of representations. On the basis of a series of evidences and previous reports on the status English RE, this 2018 document laments how the presentation of religious worldviews in schools has not always placed enough emphasis on their

diverse, plural and historical nature. It adds that even if teachers or syllabi show efforts to present diversity within religions, "this can often be reduced to crude differences between denominations. RE has sometimes inadvertently reinforced stereotypes about religions" (5). Therefore, 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, diverse and plural nature also of those institutional worldviews which "are sometimes neglected" (30), as often it is the case of Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism, but to suggest a broader range of traditions that may include, e.g., Daoism, Confucianism, Shintō, religions from Australia, Zealand and the Americas, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, historical and contemporary paganism, and recently formed traditions such as Baha'i, Latter Day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses and Rastafari (cfr. 75).

The issue of representation is not limited on the number of traditions considered, but also concerns the respect for the 'structural differences' among worldviews. This means to duly acknowledge that, for example, "different religious or non-religious worldviews may have different components or emphases" (36), in the sense that some traditions might put more weight on doctrine and orthodoxy while others might prioritize practices or orthopraxis. This observation is offered also to stress a difference with the past practices of RE which "have sometimes treated all worldviews as though they are predominantly a matter of assent to a series of propositions" (*ib.*). Moreover, while adherents may nonetheless consider such series of propositions as a representative and coherent accounts of their traditions, the same propositions are bounded to be interpreted variously in different times, cultures and places (cfr. 34) or in different levels, personal and institutional ones (cfr. 37).

All this attention and emphasis on the theoretical complexities involved in conceptualizing religious and non-religious worldviews is reflected in the explicit identification of the epistemological underpinning of this RE with a "wide range of academic disciplines" (13) such as, but not limited to, "anthropology, area studies, hermeneutics, history, other human and social sciences, philosophy, religious studies and theology" (37). This explicitly defined multidisciplinary approach resonates with the one of the study of religion\s, as we read in the document 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, my italics). This impression is reinforced as we also read a recommendation 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. (*ib.*)

To be fair, a 'theological-philosophical' approach is not completely dismissed by the document. Even if the understanding of worldviews employed by the report is not meant to touch issues of truth and truth claims, it is acknowledged that, in this new RE, there are "fertile grounds for investigation" of "revealed truths" claimed by adherents of a particular worldview (73). One may 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 of this report are quite innovative, maybe even more than the ones just described. First of all, 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 (32-33). These principles reflect the above discussions on the concept, representations and epistemological approaches to the object of the course, plus the provision for RE teachers to be competent as educators and have a secure and updated subject knowledge. Building on these principles, non-statutory programs of study, from Key stage 1 to 4, it should be developed at a national level by a body of a maximum of nine professionals, appointed by the Department for Education on the basis of recommendations from the Religious Education Council (38-39). These professionals must possess expertise in some or all the following fields:

i. specialist knowledge of Religion and Worldviews with both research and classroom experience
ii. curriculum development, within or beyond Religion and Worldviews
iii. initial teacher education or continuing professional development of teachers
iv. current or recent classroom experience in either primary or secondary phases (39).

The non-statutory national programs of study are meant to provide a "national benchmark for good practice" and, moreover, 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 syllabuses (41). SACREs and ACs should thus change into "Local Advisory Network for Religion and Worldviews" (cfr. 52-7) whose function is to facilitate the implementation of the National Entitlement, and to provide support and resources. They are should also build connection between schools and local faith and belief communities. This is because the National Entitlement indicates as the 'sources' for learning in this new RE, apart from the academic disciplines, also the "direct encounter and discussion with individuals and communities who hold these worldviews" (13).

Changes are suggested also for what concerns the composition of these local advisory network. They should be made up by members coming from five groups:

    i. teachers of Religion and Worldviews from all phases including Higher Education
    ii. school leaders and governors
    iii. ITE and/or CPD providers[38]
    iv. school providers including the LA, MATs[39], dioceses etc.
    v. religion, belief and other groups that support RE in schools or wish to do so (this might include local museums and galleries as well as religion and belief groups) (56).

We are safe to conclude that, from a DT point of view, the proposed *noosphere* sees an increased role of professionals and practitioners in the school context (teachers, teachers' trainers, curriculum developers, educational authorities and so on), along with an explicit involvement of academic researchers (both from Educational sciences and Study of religion\s). At the same time, there is a substantial lessening of the role of religious communities, as they are no more directly involved in the creation of the programs of study. It is altogether noteworthy the proposal to equate the Church of England with all the other religious traditions in the composition of the Local Advisory Networks.

In other words, among the *savoirs* to be didactically transposed a higher weigh is put on the academic disciplines. The idea that those knowledges, which I have labeled "first-order discourses on religion", should leave much more space to second-order discourses, i.e. academic ones, is explicit also in the motivation for the change of the name of the subject. In fact, it is stated that: "the name also removes the ambiguity in the phrase 'Religious Education', which is often wrongly assumed to be about making people more religious" (7).

Indeed, the general educational perspective of this RE is not limited in providing the cognitive enrichment on the subject matter and the instructional (in the sense of *istruire*, see above 2.1) introduction of pupils to knowledges and methods of various academic disciplines. These latter are also supposed to foster develop a range both specific and general transferable skills, which are nonetheless more or less intrinsic to these disciplines but have broad educative application (29). More specific skills include the following: analyzing a range of primary and secondary sources, understanding symbolic language, using technical terminology effectively, interpreting meaning and significance, performing qualitative and quantitative research, applying philosophical enquiry, applying hermeneutical approaches to texts, arts, rituals, practices and other forms of expression.

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[38] ITE stands for Initial Teachers Education and CPD stands for Continued Professional Development.

[39] LA stands for Local (Education) Authorities, MAT stands for Multi Academy Trust, that are bodies that manage more than one academy school. Academy schools are state-funded schools in England which are directly funded by the Department for Education and independent from local authority control.

Wider transferable skills and dispositions indicated include empathy, respect for others, respectful critique of beliefs and positions - especially in controversial issues, recognizing bias and stereotype, careful listening, critical thinking, self-reflection, open mindedness and representing views other than one's own with accuracy (see 29 and 77). Even if addressed in a slightly less detailed way, it is not the case that the more 'existential' educative aspects are neglected in this document. Indeed, the dimension of "spiritual, moral, social and cultural development" is a cross-cutting aim of the U.K educational policy (Ofsted 2004b: 6). It is interpreted by the commissioners - in less metaphysical terms than the previous documents – as the following: 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).

3.3 English RE: Interpretive-dialogical approach
3.3.1 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 "Interpretive approach" (Jackson 1997) has proven quite influential also beyond the British borders, and he and his team has become increasingly involved in supranational research project and other activities related to RE, 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/ODHIR concerning the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs* (OSCE 2007) and has been a contributor to a number of Council of Europe (CoE)'s initiatives on religious diversity and education since 2002, such as a project on the religious dimension of intercultural education, which produced various publications (e.g. Keats 2007). He co-organised the first Council of Europe «Exchange» between leaders of faith communities and humanist associations in Europe in Strasbourg in 2008 and 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* (Jackson 2014), which summarizes various perspectives on this issue. In the following section, however, we will address his contributions as individual scholar.

The reason for grouping under the labels "interpretive-dialogical" the works of Jackson and those of other authors lies in the fact that, other strands of RE research, both in UK and beyond, developed building up on Jackson's interpretive approach, and focused especially on the theme of dialogue, in its various dimensions. Among these scholars we can cite Julia Ipgrave. Her proposal envisions a teacher/researcher who should provide little but systematical inputs and then act only as chair or facilitator of the dialogue, providing further information only if required. Pupils encounter diverse religious tradition through internal dialogue with peers of different religious background, as well as with external individuals invited in class or reached via e-mail. Pupils are furthermore asked to set out by themselves the ethos and rules for engaging with difference and learning from it. Finally, she recommends easing the personal engagement of the pupils in order to have them express, negotiate and justify their own views (Ipgrave 2001, 2003). Other notable authors beyond U.K borders are Leganger-krogstad and Weisse (see 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 various research project on RE such as the above mentioned *REDCO* project. O'Grady approach relies heavily 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 the monograph that will be examining here the Interpretive approach is not explicitly discussed, elsewhere he attested how this latter provided the theoretical foundation of his own research (O'Grady 2013). The reason for choosing his work (O'Grady 2019) as privileged example among those of other authors, apart from being the most recent contribution, lies in his emphasis on RE as occasion to foster "democratic citizenship through the study of religion\s" (subtitle of *ib.*), which, as I wrote above in 2.4, resonates with my proposal of conceiving the "social practice of intercultural citizenship" as the social practice of reference for RE.

3.3.2 The concept of religion

To address the way in which Jackson approach the theoretical problem of religion\s we must note that his position is highly influenced by social sciences such as ethnography, anthropology and sociology. Therefore, his take on the issue of religion\s is to be seen as framed within that larger process of rethinking of the field of social sciences, started from the 70s onwards, which problematized the very concept of culture cultural processes and ethnicity. Jackson relies heavily on the hermeneutical anthropology of Geertz but also dialogue with other relevant authors such as Said, Crapanzano, 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 happens because, among other factors, individuals can draw on a large pool of cultural resources, and there are overlapping points between public and private spheres, with communities, groups and associations that acts as a kind 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 as well as power-related factors, could be seen as the general *leitmotiv* of Jackson's approach to both religion and education fields.

Concerning the topic 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 fruitfully 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*" (2008b: 21, my italics). In particular, he aligns himself near to Flood (1999)'s position (cfr. *ib.*). 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 observable with various different meanings, can be posited as a common point (*ib.*). From a more 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" (*ib.*: 20) are "social and cultural constructs, the meaning of which has changed over time, varies in different cultural situations and has never been universally agreed" (*ib.*). 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", but such recognition will always involve at least a partial construction of them (*ib.*).

Jackson proposes a sophisticated matrix of 'levels' that made up a 'religion' and account for its internal diversity, complexity and fuzziness of both internal and external borders. He suggests looking at religions as being formed by the dialectical interplay of three levels: first, the individual, in the full dimension of his/her experiences, feelings, attitude, and language, other than merely beliefs and practices. Secondly, the tradition at large, which must be conceived as not being considered in the same way by all individuals who participated in it. Thirdly, the membership group. This last level 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 stream within this subdivision (e.g. liberal, charismatic) down to the narrower denomination (e.g. Baptists) or local groups within the denomination. According to Jackson, it is at

this level that most of the social, political and power-related dynamics are more evident and where the mediation between 'individuals' and larger 'tradition' takes place, especially through overlapping processes of cultural/religious transmissions (1997: 60-9, 2008a:172-73, 2008b: 15-6). From the point of view of didactics, such matrix allows the pupils to engage a religious tradition starting from any point: a narrative describing the broader tradition in general terms, a more circumscribed account of a - maybe local - religious membership group or a single biography of one person. From here the exploration can shift to other levels and see how the interpretation of the whole religious traditions proceed through the interplay among the levels. In other words, the hermeneutical circle between parts and the whole. For example, the general narrative of the broader tradition needs to be rethought upon analyzing certain biographies of individuals or the particularities of a membership groups and vice-versa (see 2007: 81).

Turning our attention to O'Grady, although he aligns himself with the general approach proposed by Jackson, for what concerns the treatment of religion\s he relies more on the theories expounded by Smart (especially Smart 1996), who proposes a 'dialectical phenomenology' (O'Grady 2019: 122) according to which 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. He explains his choice by asserting that such conception of religion serves multiple aims, such as reducing "the danger of essentialism" (*ib.*), countering the critiques from other RE authors (e.g. Wright and Barnes, see next section) who point their finger to an overemphasis on personal experience, or, as a critique against these very authors, questioning their idea that religious are phenomena primary built around system of beliefs (158).

This multidimensional approach notwithstanding, we can see in O'Grady a certain attitude to privilege certain aspects as characteristic of 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, in his idea of RE, 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" (184-85). That such views are at odds with the more critical stances in the field of the study of religion\s is clear in his explicit dismissal of Fitzgerald's (2000, cfr. *supra* 1.7.4) critique to the concept of religion (O'Grady 2019:133-34) and in the suggestion that what is "distinctively religious or sacred" should not be neglected (196). However, no further details are provided on this topic.

As we will see, in the interpretive-dialogical approach the question of how treating theoretical issues, such as conception or representation of religion\s, is, although sophisticated, somehow

subordinated to the larger pedagogical and didactic framework of their work. This latter inevitably influences how religion and religions are treated, represented and didactically engaged. O'Grady's research's scope focuses heavily on the topic of motivation in pupils (cfr. 15-6), which is reflected in his recommendation that RE should "clarify issues of existential and ethical interest and matters of personal significance" (195). Similarly, for Jackson RE is fundamentally about "*existential* and social debates in which pupils are encouraged to participate, with a *personal stake*" (Jackson 2004: 18, my italics), and what distinguishes it from other fields are this "fundamental concerns in relation to existential and social questions and the data of religious traditions" (*ib.*).

3.3.3 The representation of religions

We have already an idea of Jackson's take on the issue of the representation of religion, which is closely linked to his proposal of the above-mentioned matrix of broader tradition, membership group and individual. On this regard, it is worth stressing again how his theoretical move is explicitly aimed at highlighting how the individual is always participating in multiple identity groups (ethnic, religious, language-related etc.). These identity groups are in dialectical relations with other groups, which in turn influence the characterization that these groups give themselves. One example is the strong emphasis on vegetarianism in some British Hindus as identity marker to distinguish themselves from non-Hindus British. Another example with the same case is the adoption, by British Hindus, of modern Euro-American values and ideas, such as individual autonomy, their dislike for *jāti*-groupism and their adoption of protestant-influenced ideas on religion (1997: 65-9). What is important to note, however, is that Jackson's approach developed primarily out of the insights that he and his team members gained by doing ethnographic research on the religious nurture of children (age 8-13) from various British religious communities, especially from both "new minorities" (Islam, Hindu, Sikh), and old "minorites" such as Jewish and various denomination of Christianity. Coherently with this methodology, Jackson and his team developed also a series of textbooks in which they translated all the various the ethnographic materials gathered through interaction and fieldworks with insiders such as children and their families, or the local and nationally recognized religious authorities. These insiders were also involved in checking, commenting and even criticizing the materials during the development process (for more detail on this process see *ib.:* 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

KS 3 pupils (Wayne, Everington and al. 1996), whose selection of topics focuses of a quite broad range of practices (I will quote *verbatim* the names of the chapters): "Worship and prayer: ways of worshipping"; "Worship and prayer: picturing God"; "Arti and prashad"; "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!" (*ib*.: 24). These statements, comments and other information about these children are sided with general explanation 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 of topics, the above list of chapters shows a fairly equilibrated representation of various aspects, without excessive focus on the 'usual suspects' such as doctrines and texts. The pupils-centered focus of the interpretive approach can be seen 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 are also the expedient of the portrayed children with their statements and comments, along with narration of various aspects of their religious life. 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 UK pupils are expected to actually interact with. Such emphasis on ethnographic data centered around 'peer-insiders' is even more evident from the decision to "make use of categories or division within the tradition" (Jackson 1997: 110), and arrange the topics around insiders' categories, as we can see, for example, in a KS-2 textbook on Christianity whose topics are entitled as " 'joining', 'learning', 'believing and worshipping', 'prayer and praise', the 'Bible', 'living as a Christian', 'sharing' and 'caring for others' (*ib*.: 115).

What seems missing in these modalities of representation, even if we have seen how the historical aspect of religion\s is not ignored by Jackson (see previous section), is a diachronic view of religious diversity. It seems that diversity within a tradition could not be accounted trough historical development but simply as a given fact. Meijer (2004) too notes this missing dimension. Since her insights resonate with issues of cultural self-awareness, especially of one's own bias and stereotypes (cfr. above 2.4.3 and 2.4.4), and since they are taken up as fruitful suggestion by Jackson (2004: 92-4), it is worth citing them in this section. Briefly, Meijer argues that the interpretive approach could benefit from employing the concept of tradition in historical perspective. What she suggests, though, is a more focused on the study of one's own tradition(s) of reference, instead of the historical perspective of other traditions. In one's own tradition she includes all those assumptions, values and prejudices that arise from one's personal and social history.[40] The aim is to help students, through especially the encounter with the 'unfamiliar', to uncover the preconceptions they inherit from 'their tradition' and to gain new insights in re-examining one's sense of identity from a new perspective. At any rate, we see also here how it is the pupils-centeredness to drive the modalities of representation.

This is even more evident in 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). However, on the other side 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 (cfr. 47). According to him, religious material should be chosen in order to have pupils consider such material as a way to clarify their own beliefs and values. Pupils are invited to address materials through their own questions and concerns, which, we are said, revolve especially around "existential and ethical interest and matters of personal significance" (cfr. 191-2).

O'Grady does not discuss in detail which aspects of religion should be privileged, for the very reason that, 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 (cfr. e.g. 19-21). He provides nonetheless with reports from his own action-research cycles, from which we read, for example, that Islam has been engaged through the following topics. First, 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 he highlights those involving personal views of the pupils. For example, how did it felt for Mohammed to be rejected and forced from Mecca, compared to the personal experience of one pupil who had to

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[40]I would suggest including, among these assumptions, also the very idea of what counts as religion (cfr. above 1.7.1 and 1.7.2).

leave the USA. Next, they explored the concept of *tawḥīd* or onenness of Allah. Pupils were asked to create artistic artifacts through which they would also to "relate the words to their own personal circumstances" (77) and "showing what the idea of oneness means to you personally" (*ib.*). As other topics, they engaged with *zakat* or mandatory charitable contribution, with the ritual prayer and with a comparative discussion 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 in motivating in 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. Apart from this discussion on the role of pupils' motivation in determining the representations of religion/s to be adopted, he limits himself in suggesting that, in order to address religions exhaustively, one should employ a broad representation modality based on Smart's work. He acknowledges that there are areas of improvement and takes up suggestions from other authors, such as the idea of incorporating media portrayals of religions and making pupil reflect of how these could affect their views (143).

Lastly, coherently with the pupil-centered approach, it is O'Grady conviction - and also in Jackson's more recent works (e.g. Jackson 2004: 179) - to include also non-religious worldviews as contents to be addressed in RE. The motivation lies in the educational aims and methods of his proposal of RE, that is, fostering democratic participation and citizenship competences through RE dialogues (see more below 3.3.5). Since many pupils do not necessarily identify or side themselves with religious traditions, in order to foster motivating dialogues, also their non-religious perspective must be taken into account and therefore inserted in RE curriculum (160).

3.3.4 Epistemological underpinnings

Here again we may want to recall and deepen what we have hinted above. Jackson's interpretive approach draws on a variety of insights and perspective from humanities and social sciences. The very word "interpretive" that he uses is explicitly taken from Geertz's *Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). In particular, he draws from Geertz the 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).

Moreover, Jackson links Geertz's interpretive anthropology with Waardernburg (1978)'s 'new style' of phenomenology. According to this latter, *epoché* should be extended to the concept of religion itself and there must be a due acknowledgment of other contexts and factors such as the social, the cultural and the economic. Moreover, and more importantly, in place of the idea of re-experiencing a supposed 'pure' essence of religious phenomena, or of individuating 'universal' categories, 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 (cfr. Jackson1997: 25-8 and 38).

Such appreciation of the active role of the observer's subjectivity is balanced by Jackson by the due acknowledgement of the risks of appropriation, simplification and projection of one's own biases and stereotypes inherent in every analysis of any cultural object. In this sense, Jackson takes into account also 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 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, because it has a peculiar nature on its own. Just as we have seen in previous sections (1.7), 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 religion, 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, we can say that he does not develop further the overall epistemological framework of Jackson, but that he instead focuses in particular on the issue of interpretation, but 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*" (47, my italics).

Concerning *interpretation* and *response*, according to O'Grady, hermeneutics (especially from a Gadamerian point of view) should be applied in RE in order to foster expansion of pupils' horizons through interpretive encounters between pupils and religious traditions, as well as between pupils and pupils. Encounters that, he states, "always have potential to generate new and significant meaning" (192). Indeed, as the subtitle of his monograph states, RE should be set up as a "dialogue with difference" and in such "hermeneutical pedagogy", 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. However, 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 e.g. gender (193). They are also expected to make comparisons and contrasts to their own perspectives, drawing conclusion about question of various nature, value-related questions included (195).

Concerning *criticism*, O' Grady affirms that "RE should not over-emphasise religious experience nor deny pupils opportunities for critical debate" (193) since the "assessment" - i.e. value judgment - of religions, by learners, is an inevitable outcome (132). By doing this he also intends to answer to warnings from those authors, which I have labeled "rational-theological" (see below 3.4), concerning the risk of over-emphasizing pupils' subjective religious experience at the expenses of a critical debate. 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" (*ib.*), 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 its existential relevance for the pupils, we have to go back to Jackson and note that also in his work - notwithstanding the robust reliance on academic studies on religions - we find ambiguous statements about this topic. In trying to anticipate criticism on the interpretive 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, although not the exact opposite, 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 caveat that it should be inappropriate to encourage the very young to engage in debates about

claims to truth, and to exercise caution in respect to minorities. Nonetheless, in case pupils rise such issues, teachers "should not stifle or prevent such discussions" (125).

In summary, we can see how, for both Jackson and O'Grady, it is the factor of active involvement of the pupils what ultimately guides their approach. The "personal agency" of pupils, says Jackson (2004: 163) is "an important ingredient of religious education" (*ib.*), while for O'Grady, we have already seen, motivation is the key factor and contents should be arranged so that "RE pupils could be motivated if enabled to link their own questions and concerns to religious material" (191). Such emphasis on subjective involvement of pupils is not without reason and it depends on the broad educational framework - in terms of both aims and methods - in which these RE proposals are built. Therefore, we will first touch the educational dimension and then see how this affects the didactic transposition process.

3.3.5 Educational dimension

The influence of social sciences, especially anthropology and ethnography, is also present 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 a kind of phenomenological *epoché*) but make comparisons between their owns concepts and those relative to the phenomena studied. The point is to individuate possible overlappings of meaning or contrasts, and engaging with a back-and-forward movement from one's own perspective and that of the insider, aided by devices such as the "analogous experience" (cfr. Jackson 1997: 110-11, 2009: 402). A practical example would be:

> 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. (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 *alii*, 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. More in detail, it involves the

exercise, by the pupil, of relating the material drawn from one of the three 'levels' - individual, membership group, tradition - to material drawn from another level, so that any pieces of information shades light on the other ones (1997: 115-16).

The learning process of interpretation, as it touches directly the subjectivity and the personal experience of the pupils, is expected to foster another important process - even if, according to Jackson, being a process "personal to the student", teachers "cannot guarantee that it will happen", although many methods can be applied to ease it (2008: 175). This process is 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" (2009: 402), and it is further divided in *Constructive criticism* and *Edification*.

The first term refers to the ability of critically engaging 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 (e.g. when taking notes or preparing a presentation in class) 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 (cfr. 1997: 129; 2009: 404).

The *Edification* process is a bit more detailed, and Jackson takes direct inspiration from reflections of famous anthropologists who stressed how the engagement with different cultures brought them to reflect on their own background and assumption. He cites from 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 (1982: 127, cit. in Jackson 1997: 130).

And from 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. (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" (2009: 403). This can be obtained not only by engaging with ethnographic sources, but also with historical exploration of one's own tradition(s) of reference, as suggested by Meijer (2004, see above 3.3.3).

Jackson links his idea of edification with the above cited RE key attainment target of "learning from religion"(1997: 131-32). He does so especially in reference to the original formulation of this concept by 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 ideas, affirms that, since interpretation stems from a dialectic movement between self and other, such 'self' should be put in the foreground and engaged adequately. In the textbooks, for example, there are indications about encouraging students to re-examine aspects of their own understanding in the light of questions, issues or experiences which are encountered in particular religious traditions, but "which also have universal significance" (Wayne, Everington *et al.* 1996: 4). Thus, RE should make "pupils and their concerns a key element of 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 (see above 3.3.3), "pupils' own religio-cultural experiences, reflections and interactions can and should be part of the subject matter of religious education" (108). This methodology is furthermore encouraged since "a religious education disconnected from pupils' own questions and concerns is very likely to fail to engage and to motivate them" (2009: 403). Therefore, Jackson presents various case studies in which this "potentially transformative character of religious education" (2004:108) is highlighted as successful example of implementation of his interpretive approach. These are cases in which a teacher manages to connect religious material to the "spiritual needs" (106) of her pupils with special needs, or cases in which the "affective concerns" (*ib.*) 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, we can say that his broad education framework has three main strands, deeply interrelated. The first is an underpinning Deweyan philosophy of education, the second is the focus on the issue of motivation and the third is the identification of "democratic citizenship" as one of RE's main aims.

Concerning the first strand, according to Dewey the process of education is understood as being framed in a biunivocal relationship between the individual and the environment - especially the social

one. When O'Grady affirms that the "social environment of learning is of deep importance" (2019:130), he does so by explicitly drawing from Dewey's differentiation between training, which is the manipulation of the environment to secure useful habits in others, and education which, instead, involves co-partnership and shared commitments to agreed values and modalities of interactions between competing rationalities. Such commitments, says O'Grady, are directed towards no other than democratic values and those social ways of coexistence that could be synthesized as "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. In order to engage pupils in RE, O'Grady argues that "the development of identity is the key question for adolescents" (47), which means that RE should enable the pupils "to link their own questions and concerns to religious material" (193). Involvement of pupils also takes the form of the action research methodology, in the sense that they became co-planners of their own learning, by having them writing logs and participating in interviews where they provide feedback about the contents and methods of their RE lessons, which are then taken into account by the teacher who adjusts curriculum and practices accordingly (cfr. 55-66). Furthermore, by involving pupils and making them responsible for communal decision about their own education, such 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 we can also wrap up the previous two. For O'Grady, contribution to democratic citizenship should be RE's overarching aim (8). He affirms so also in the light of Dewey's lesson according to which the support of democratic social order is not only a desired outcome but also a "fundamental purpose of education" (193). How to combine these themes together? O'Grady's key argument in connecting these strands is that, in the case of adolescent, elements of education for identity overlap with those of citizenship education. Such overlapping occurs because both educational concerns 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, cfr. 33-41).

RE enters in such context as it represents an occasion for - following the title - "dialogue with difference". For O'Grady dialogue must feature "attentive listening", promote "the expression and consideration of different perspectives" in a "safe but not necessarily comfortable environment". Here 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, e.g. by discovering that religions are internally diverse, pupils may become "more flexible about their own identities" (149). By being challenged by plurality and diversity, not only represented by learning materials, but also by their peers' personal views which are stimulated by these materials, pupils may gain awareness of what shapes their identity and their own background assumptions (cfr. 193). In particular, they should start investigating constraints such as media influences or gender biases on their ability to engage sympathetically and critically with others' traditions (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 need also to learn to disagree constructively (a competence in itself linked to citizenship education) (cfr. 146-7).

In summary, for O'Grady RE should - and is particular apt to - work in a framework of citizenship education, insofar it brings the challenge of diversity and plurality, especially in "issues of existential and ethical interest and matters of personal significance" (195). It is these latter which RE should focus on, since such matters are what mostly stir up questions related to the identity development of pupils. This engagement on personal level of the pupils[41], coupled with a more active and responsible participation in their own learning, and the practice of dialogue that should foster processes of *interpretation* and *reflexivity* (cfr. above with Jackson), are argued to be key factors in developing competences of citizenship education. All these observations left us with very little doubt on which social practices of reference O' Grady has in mind.

Returning to Jackson, while in his first monograph he does not address in detail the issue, he too - unsurprisingly, given his perspective which strongly emphasizes the complexities of socio-cultural dynamics - investigates in various occasions the connection 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 social sciences as well as in

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[41] It must be noted that O'Grady maintains that is up to the pupil to decide the degree of personal investment in RE (196).

intercultural education emphasize the dynamic interaction, contestation and negotiation inherent in socio-cultural phenomena, so that borders between sociocultural groups are rather fuzzy and individuals continuously reshape culture by drawing to variety of both autochthonous and foreign sources (2004: 126-31). In order to overcome reification and stereotypization which may fuel intolerance and racism, such representation of complexity should be implemented in education. The same argument applies to the representation of religions which, due to strong connection to identity and ethnicity discourses, are especially critical when it comes to political issues such as coexistence with minority groups (cfr. 2005: 5-8). In such situation, Jackson argues that the interpretive approach can adequately provide such education to complexity. First of all, his threefold matrix of the representation of religion follows the same exact logic of avoiding reification and emphasizing complexity. Secondly, the pillar of *Reflexivity* gives pupils opportunities to consider the "impact of new learning on their own belief and values and applying 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" (2004: 141). Thirdly, the interpretive approach fosters interactionist/dialogical attitudes as it focuses on engaging with real lives of insiders (such as the pupils portrayed in the textbook developed by Jackson's team) and on developing dialogue and mutual learning among classmates, thus preparing for future intercultural encounters.

The dimension of interaction and dialogue is pivotal also for what concerns citizenship education. Jackson considers the school as a "microcosmos of democratic society and therefore the ideal place to practice ideas of citizenship" (138). On one hand, since the argument that religions are nowadays reduced to the mere private dimension of individuals is no more feasible (cfr. Jackson 2003: 62-9, 2004: 4-21, 139), the interpretive approach ensures that such dialogue and participation is informed by an understanding of the grammar—the language and wider symbolic patterns the language - found in different religious traditions in their various level of individual, membership group and tradition at large, and by the skills of interpretation necessary to gain that understanding (2002: 70). On the other hand, especially the dialogue-focused development of the interpretive approach (e.g. O'Grady), are seen by Jackson as maximizing, through their very methodology, the participation of the pupils in various way, notably by training them to become aware of their preconceptions (and how they are formed) lurking in their interactions. Furthermore, since "the very nature of religious though" is an "engagement with ultimate questions" (2004:139), dialogical religious education is an ideal forum for the development of skills of dialogue and negotiation.

In conclusion, even if Jackson may have not originally conceived his approach having in mind, as the social practices of reference, the dimensions of intercultural interaction and citizenship competences, he subsequently identified them as the ideal foci of RE, especially for a RE informed

by his interpretive approach. This does not mean that Jackson's RE ultimately boils down to intercultural and citizenship education. Instead, it maintains a certain peculiar focus on the subjective dimension of the pupils, as will be clear in the next section.

3.3.6. Didactic transposition

As a way to conclude our analysis of Jackson's and O'Grady's work, let us ask how the "interpretive-dialogical approach" is conceived vis-à-vis the body of scholarly knowledge dealing with the topic of religion and religions. We have seen how Jackson heavily and explicitly draws from various scholarly sources, both from authors more directly involved with the study of religion\s (Smith, Waardernburg) and others coming from anthropology (notably Geertz and his critics), from social sciences in general, and also from cultural criticism (notably Said). We may identify the knowledge exemplified by such authors as the *savoir savant* taken by Jackson as reference, and that is 'synthetized', first of all, as the three-layered representational matrix of individual/membership group/tradition at large. This concept does not only serve as a methodological guidance for teachers on how to represent religions to pupils, but is also a didactic transposition of the *savoir savant* into a learning object which the pupils are expect to master (see above the *Work it out* task in the textbooks).

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" (2009: 410), as well as a training that allows them to exercise "flexibility in approaching debates about 'cultures', 'ethnic groups' and 'communities'" (*ib.*).

However, RE as a subject does not, according to Jackson, reduce itself as a "fixed body of knowledge". This is because this subject 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" (see 2004: 17-8).

We see such 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* of the (hermeneutical) anthropologist, 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 - somehow coarsely - assume that it is a discipline primarily concerned with the production of knowledge, descriptive as well as explicative, empirical as well as theoretical, concerning a quite broad object of enquiry - e.g. "human society and behaviour" (Scupin 2016: 112). We may draw here a parallel between this aspect of anthropology and Jackson's concept of *Representation*, i.e. the threefold matrix, which is in fact presented by himself as the one of the main pillars of his RE, the others being the above discussed *Interpretation* and *Reflexivity*. For anthropology as *savoir savant* to produce this knowledge, relevant methods and methodology - what Jackson transposes as *Interpretation* - have to be developed and discussed. Concerning the self-reflective side - Jackson's *Reflexivity* - also anthropology, beyond the already mentioned insight from Leach and Turner, indeed underwent a process of self-review, engendered by the theoretical developments of deconstructionism, postmodernism and postcolonialism (see e.g. Erickson & Murphy 2016: 222-50), which parallels, and often overlaps, the one already discussed in the field of the study of religion\s (see above 1.7). However, these self-reflections and self-criticism in anthropology were mainly focused on epistemology, on research ethics and on broad political and ethical questions relating issues of power, representation and inequality (which Jackson nonetheless acknowledges). Less space is devoted to subjective reflections on personal matters.[42]

We have seen, instead, how the *Edification* side of the *Reflexivity* pillar is meant also 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: 466-67 and Jensen T. 2010: 74), in Jackson' RE, as well as in English RE in general, although there is a

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[42] To be fair, the postmodern skepticism on the value-free objectivity of sciences, and of social sciences in particular, engendered a process of rethinking of the ethnographic methods. Such rethinking concerned itself in particular with the issue of the subjectivity of the researcher and with the need of reflexivity towards both the personal and socio-cultural background of the researcher (cfr. Aull Davies 1999: 3-26; Olivier de Sardan 2014: 103-33). One of this development 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 function of buttressing the scientific project of 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 (cfr. Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011: 39). These trends, as well as the excessive focus on subjectivity in general, have been object of several critiques. For example, Remotti (2014) laments how such "postmodernist intoxication" led to an excessively solipsistic and self-referential anthropology. Olivier de Sardan (2014) 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"(131). In the field of the study of religion\s, one of the most famous example 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), whose author ends by becoming a practitioner herself. See Strenski (2015: 203-4) for a critique of her epistemological choices.

recognized distinction between "learning about religion", "learning from religion" and religious nurture (in the sense of transmission of religious knowledge, not necessarily inculcation or indoctrination), these borders are often "intentionally blurred" (Grelle 2009: 467), because of a lingering general idea that learning about religions and learning into one's own religion actually *are* and *can* be positively complementary (cfr. Jackson 1997: 4). This is further helped also by the *Interpretation* pillar which, we have seen, urges the pupils to 'build bridges' towards foreign practices or concept by resorting to own personal experience that may act as an analogy. We may conceive this method as Jackson' transposition of the "experience-near/experience-far" dyad of Geertz. These personal experiences, which may also include those of religious nature, became in this way susceptible to rethinking through such bringing operation.

To sum up, if 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" touches also the personal sphere, has have equal weight to the 'outward looking' one and the two and are seen as complementary (cfr. 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 does construe his proposal on a robust base of scholarly theories and insights, he recommends avoiding "axiomatic secular humanists 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 have to 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 the methodological postulate of the study of religion\s. On a similar vein, Jackson also recommends a "sensitive application of academic methods and standards" (140) that should be furthermore open to "critical scrutiny of commentators within religious and secular traditions" (*ib.*). Analogously, it is recommended to find a balance between "sources reflecting the understanding of different academic disciplines" and "those representing the perception of different kinds of insiders" (*ib.*). Exemplary in this sense is also the lack of detailed indications 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 of what counts as religion[43] (see above 3.3.2), and recommends a 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 the engagement with the theoretical study of religion\s, and if such body of knowledge should be considered only as a guidance for teacher or as a theoretical and methodological knowledge to be also transmitted to pupils.

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, first of all, a safe space in which non-religious and (especially) religious pupils may explore both own and peers's 'personal religious/existential issues in a climate of respect and mutual learning (cfr. e.g. Jackson 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 say that his perspective does not differ from Jackson's. We have seen that his approach is strongly dialogical also in its methodology, 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, a knowledge aimed only at providing the teacher with the essential vocabulary and conceptual guidance in order to be an informed facilitator, while the major part 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 on the same level both the level of acquisition of propositional contents and the "personal and social development" (cfr. 2019: 196) gained through such interaction, 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 (e.g. methodological agnosticism), we should take note of the following: O'Grady, in responding to critiques about the 'possible risk', in his approach, of "failure to deal with the sacred" (180) by the pupils, does not respond, as a scholar of religion\s would, that dealing in this term with an essentialized, *sui generis* concept is outside the scope of the discipline. Instead, he assures that his

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[43] It has to be noted that Jackson makes explicit his idea of religion in the form of a response to the critique of upholding a non-realist view of religion (see Jackson 2008b), while in his other main works he does not deal with this topic in great detail.

approach does not entail such risk, and accepts the recommendation of giving due attention to the *peculiarities* of theological language (cfr. 161-5, 180-2).

In conclusion, for both Jackson and O'Grady, the influence of the educational aim of "learning from religion", with its ambiguities and overlapping between existential, 'spiritual', theological, and identity development-related dimensions, is clearly recognizable. Therefore, this educational aim is sometimes at odds with the academic framework, which is supposed to inform their approaches, especially for what concerns the contemporary study of religion\s. This results in a peculiar process of didactic transposition.

3.4. English RE: Rational-theological approach
3.4.1 Introduction

I regroup under this label the works of two prominent authors in the fields of RE in England. The first is Andrew Wright, active from the early 90s till 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 University of Oxford, Angela Wright from King's College 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, Goodman, Wright and Wright 2019, hereafter Wright *et alii* 2019), but other relevant works by Wright will be examined.

The other author is L. Philip Barnes, presently Emeritus Reader in Religious and Theological Education at the King's College of London. It has edited for the publisher Routledge a collection of the major works about RE (Barnes & Arthur 2016) issued in the journal which is the main forum for academic discussion on English RE and beyond, the *British Journal of Religious Education*.

The reasons why I put these authors together, as we will see in the upcoming analysis, lies in their common focus on 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 in pupils competences for rationally assessing and judging the main doctrinal tenets of the religious traditions. Both of them prefer to call these

tenets "truth-claims" of various religions, and conceive them accordingly. In their approach such truth claims are to be critically analyzed one against each other on the base of their rational consistency. This explains the choice of my wordings "rational-theological"[44], 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, accordingly to them, upholds a universalistic theological agenda in which all religions are said to share a common truth. We will address this issue more in detail by exploring the concept of religion employed in the rational-theological approach.

3.4.2 The concept 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 a paradigm of RE whose roots can be traced to the romantic tradition represented by Schleiermacher and whose perspective is exemplified e.g. by theologians such as John Hick (1922-2012). For Wright, especially from 1980s onwards, the most fashionable basic assumption in English RE was that there is a same infinite divine reality behind different religious phenomena whose truth is expressed though inner feelings and emotion, while the different doctrines are "accidental" (Wright 2000: 32ff and cfr. also Barnes 2007: 19-20). According to Wright, the strategy of this approach, since it eschews issues such as 'revelation' and 'reason', is aimed at reconciling faith with modern culture and at avoiding conflicts between truth claims. He thinks that such inclusive educational model is the presently dominant model born out of the historical development, i.e. the collapse of the Christian consensus surrounding spiritual development, the emergence of liberal humanism as the dominant philosophy underlying the public education system, which is particularly struggling for social integration. Therefore, such RE cannot but "pre-package spirituality in terms of established and obtainable curriculum goals" (67) and these

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[44] 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, behind their works, some postulates typical of religionist insiders.

goals "must either be (i) as inclusive as possible, concerned to avoid any hint of controversy, or (ii) committed to a selected exclusive tradition, one capable of imposing a clear spiritual agenda" (*ib.*).

This approach is deemed highly flawed by Wright because it disregards the differences between the various religious traditions in favor of an overly simplistic attitude, nurtured in the "cult of 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 any critical stance. Furthermore, this RE paradigm is considered as forming in itself a distinctive – and hence paradoxically exclusive – spiritual tradition grounded in a mishmash of romantic and even post-modern ideology. Indeed (cfr. also Wright 2004) one of the most recent evolution of this RE is what he calls postmodern RE which, in concert with the 'D.I.Y.' spirituality of New Age and also some postmodern theological approaches (by him harshly criticized), encourages pupils to develop their "own personal and idiosyncratic vision of ultimate reality" (Wright 2000: 76).

We find very similar criticism also in Barnes, and indeed they have written a joint article (Barnes & Wright 2006) in which they argue against a modern RE based on "romantic pluralistic theology" (cfr. 69). Barnes (2014, 1st ch.) argues that, even if the English RE is considered one of the best practices in EU, it has its evident shortcomings and inner criticism. More precisely, the so-called thematic approach (i.e. a comparison throughout various religions focusing on certain common themes) often ends in being too shallow and prone to the risk of confusing pupils. For example, by equating the Christian Bible with the Hindu Upaniṣad (16). This is because the "adoption of the phenomenological approach determined the subsequent character and direction of religious education in Britain" (79), which uncritically appropriated the axioms and commitments of the phenomenology of religion. These axioms, according to Barns' critique (94-113), posit religion as an essential element of human nature, that different religions are different ways to relate to God, and that language is an inadequate vehicle for expressing religious cognition. Feeling and emotion are instead more apt way of expressing religiosity and can go, furthermore, beyond the doctrinal differences. Therefore, such inner dimension-based RE can be non-confessional, non-dogmatic and, accordingly, educationally responsible and fit to foster respect and positive attitude towards others in a multifaith society. However, Barnes along with Wright, laments how this approach fails to acknowledge the fact that the truths of religions is publicly disputed and, furthermore, implicitly promotes a well-defined worldview:

> 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). Concerning the issue of how to address plurality, "if we take religious pluralism seriously, then religious education must deal with a plurality of distinctive interpretations of religion" (73).

On the base of these observations, we are safe to conclude that they are firmly against an interpretation of religions as sharing common metaphysical and/or psychological roots and against an epistemological approach to religions through a simplistic comparativism and a subjective-emotional engagement. What do they propose instead, then?

Wright, in his main monographs devoted to RE (e.g. 2000, 2004, 2007), does not address directly the issue of the conception of religion in itself, but enlarges instead the scope of discussion bringing forth 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" (2000: 175). In this way he intends to address on the same level not only the religious traditions, but all those worldviews that affirm a certain order-of-things, such as secularist or postmodern worldviews, the sense that the first is said to put truth in natural and social sciences, while the latter does negate any objective truth (see e.g. Wright *et alii*: 2019: 20-1). At the same time, however, he does emphasize how "any study of religion\s that does not have at its heart the exploration of question of transcendence [...] will, from the outset, be a reductive activity to do justice to the heart of religion" (2004: 212). Such focus on 'transcendence' is not seen as problematic when the comparison is also done with perspectives such as secularism, postmodernism or even atheism and agnosticism, since for Wright "the question of religious commitment is universal and unavoidable [...] atheism and agnosticism are just as much act of faith as positive religious commitment" (2000: 27). We can find more details on how he conceives religion and religions, especially in ontological terms, in an article in which he argues against a constructivist perspective (2008). It is worth to add, at this point, that he explicitly characterizes his position as belonging to the philosophical strand of "Critical realism", which, in his words

> ... maintains both that we can identify forms, structures and identities across many dimensions of reality (natural, psychological, social, moral, aesthetic, religious, etc.), and that, given the contingent nature of human rationality, it is not necessary to posit such forms, structures and identities as unchanging essences (7).[45]

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[45] It must be noted, however, that from this same position he argues not only that a reality independent of our perception exist, and that it is possible to obtain a rational knowledge thereof, but also that such reality involves a

Concerning the ontological status of religions, he draws on Searle and addresses them as "robust and substantial social facts" created by a collective intentionality (10) which is enough consistent and homogeneous to justify not only the use of tags such as "Christianity", but also of those ones coined by outsider such as "Buddhism" and "Hinduism" (8). In his view it is possible to talk of "fuzzy edges" that surround a "prototypical" nucleus of all religions traditions" (cfr. 7-8, 10-1) so that we may find also Christian 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 "worldview" and attributes to them four key functions:

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)

Interestingly enough, again on the ontological status of religion, he adds that:

The interrelationship between these four factors provides worldviews with an inner depth and coherence that requires us *to penetrate beneath the surface appearance and engage with their deep structures* (my italics). (*ib.*)

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" (2014: 120). Other non-religious worldviews, however, are still seen by him as possible 'competitors' of religions, since the former negate the transcendent reality of the latter. Concerning a more detailed definition of religion, he states that

... the term religion is appropriate:

1. in the context of belief in a transcendent or supernatural reality that is regarded as unconditionally and non- dependently real, and as such, should be regarded (in a stipulative sense) as divine; in other words, that what is regarded as unconditional and non- dependent is appropriately designated 'divine';

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dimension defined as the "ultimate truth" or "ultimate order-of-things" (see. e.g. Wright *et alii* 2019: 2-3 and ch. 3 *passim* or 2000: 77).

2. where there is a distinctive account of the nature of the divine that 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.

Barnes, moreover, does acknowledge the possibility of inner variation and creativity within religions, also beyond the great 'schism' of the various traditions, and even at the level of individuals. These latter may combine various beliefs in eclectic way and ultimately are not only passive receivers, but also active interpreters of doctrines handed down from institutions, texts and specialists (121-23).

However, these observations do not refrain him from attributing, very similarly to Wright, a certain strong ontological status to religious traditions. They are "coherent wholes" (212), and this coherence is ultimately derived from a distinctive core made up by beliefs:

> Religions are, at least, scheme 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 Marxists that believed in a free competitive market (211-12)[46]. Since beliefs are the core of religion, it logically follows that "appreciation of the role and significance of sacred writings in the religions and the authority accorded to claims to divine revelation" (212) is pivotal when engaging religions. So, even if he concedes that religions are fluids and flexible and that their boundaries 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.

Therefore, words such as Christianity, Hinduism etc. can retain still their descriptive function with the adequate contextualization (207ff). Interestingly enough, also for Barnes the acknowledgment that names such as Hinduism or Buddhism have been coined by outsiders and colonial powers is irrelevant: "nothing interesting philosophically follows from this" (209). The rationale for this is that the usefulness or appropriateness of a term is not affected by who invented or employed them: "The

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[46] Since I will provide my critical analysis in the final chapters, I limit myself here to observe how the empirical reality often contradicts the coherence of 'orthodox' doctrine and texts, as it is in the case of the Chinese interpretation of socialism and Marxism. I think that even this simple observation reinforces my idea of engaging Asian examples as possible 'corrective tools' for European RE, and beyond.

theory of evolution would still be true if it had originated as Nazi propaganda, and its distinctive terminology would still retain its explanatory role!" (*ib.*)

Concerning more in detail dimensions such as distinctiveness or functions of religion, Barnes does not give explicit hints, apart from the fact that, given his focus on belief and normative texts, he emphasizes how religions mainly offer competitive interpretation over the nature of reality (213). Given his emphasis on those part of RE institutional documents that highlight the weight of moral educative outcome expected in RE pupils (see above 3.2), it could be surmised that for Barnes religions are also supposed to provide moral guidance as derived from their key beliefs.

3.4.3 The representations of religions

Somehow, we have already addressed part of this issue in the previous sections: religions are ultimately phenomena that revolve around well-defined and clearly differentiated propositions about the ultimate nature of things, which are in turn inscribed in normative texts. Thus, there is a certain hierarchy, both ontological and epistemological, that puts the intellectual/textual/normative aspects as preeminent over material/social/pragmatic aspects (cfr. Wright *et alii* 2019: 40). It follows that beliefs, doctrinal propositions and relative texts are the key aspects to be taken into account when dealing with religions and also that, through the individuation and discernment of these key aspects, it is possible to distinguish different and coherent religious traditions in accord to the paradigm of the world religions: Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism. It is difficult, however, to have further details concerning how religion and religions are supposed to be represented in the main writings of the two authors taken in consideration, especially because these works focus mainly on the theoretical foundations of their RE model. In this situation is therefore particularly useful, in the case of Wright, to refer to the above cited *Critical Religious Education in Practice* (2019). Also here we found reiterated the idea that "many religious believers do hold their beliefs as propositional beliefs. That is, they are beliefs about the way things actually are in the world" (10), but concrete examples are also provided. It is interesting to note that they propose, as introductory scheme of work, a series of lessons focused on the issues of "ultimate questions" which I would preliminarily comment as endorsing an implicit paradigm that I may label as "Greek-Judeo-Christian", 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)

Since the analysis of this kind of ultimate questions is proposed in order to lay the groundwork for further developments, it should not surprise a strong focus on doctrinal issues or, as the authors put it, "truth claims". This is reflected in the next proposal of scheme of work (4th ch.), which takes Islam as an example of a way of addressing a world religion. The topics to be explored are explicitly set in these terms: an overview of the life of the Prophet Muhammad, with special focus on those contexts that make sense of the key teachings of Muhammad. Next, the Qur'an and the Hadith should be presented, followed by an overview of "six key belief 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, the predestination of everything by Allah. Concerning the practices, the Five Pillars are addressed one for each lesson, with the recommendation of highlighting the connection with beliefs. One lesson is devoted to the difference between Sunni and Sh'ia Islam. Finally, other three topics are proposed for their particular sensitivity or contemporary relevance: the concept of Jihad (greater and lesser), the role/dress ect. of women and the Shari'ah law (cfr. p. 45ff).

I think it is safe to judge this modality of representation as quite 'monolithic'. In the detailed overview of the scheme of work (47-67) and in the additional materials proposed[47] I have been not able to find any hints envisioning the idea of the historical character or historical development of Muslims' beliefs or practices.

The same applies for scheme of work proposed as guidance to implement a GCSE[48] preparation course on Religious Studies, with Buddhism and Christianity as the two traditions of choice. Given the focus of the present study in Asian religions, I will address the contents regarding Buddhism (148-50).

They propose 24 lessons devoted to Buddhism, 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 - no further specifications are added but I surmise, on the base of following indications, that with "denominational differences" just Mahāyāna and Theravāda distinctions are implied. Lesson 5 is devoted to initial responses by students to 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?" (see more below in

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[47] Available upon purchase from the website: www.routledge.com/cw/easton.
[48] General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is an academic qualification taken by pupils in secondary education in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Each GCSE qualification is in a particular subject, and stands alone. Usually, a suite of such qualifications is accepted as record of school achievement at the age of 16. The GCSE on religious studies has four different versions, but in any case the students must prepare themselves on two religious traditions.

3.4.4). Lessons 6 and 7 continue on 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 of the possibility of attaining Buddahood and Buddhā nature are proposed.

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:

- Samatha (concentration and tranquility) including mindfulness of breathing
- Vipassana (insight) including zazen
- the visualisation of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. (149)

Lessons 14 and 15 aim at presenting the "puja/devotional ritual" (*ib.*) at home and in the temple, including chanting "both as a devotional practice and as an aid to mental concentration" (*ib.*), 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 Mahayana tradition, karma and rebirth, compassion and "loving kindness" - i.e. *mettā* (150). The last two lessons are meant for reflections and feedback.

As can we see, more than a half of the topics regards doctrinal matters. A more emphasis on variations in practices can be recognized, but a very coherent 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, what is proposed is to purposely seek for a coherence between "fundamental beliefs" and practices even in front of inconsistencies with the living practice (cfr. 139).

After all, since beliefs are presented and, we will see, also *engaged* as "truth claims", to address them focusing on their variable, historical character would be contradictory with the overall framework of this approach. This observation is further corroborated by looking at the proposed scheme of work called "Critical Religious Education and philosophy: an exemplar scheme of work for teaching science and religion" (69-101). This is entirely devoted to a comparison between scientific methods and scientific theories relevant to ultimate questions, such as the Big Bang theory and the theory of evolution, with the biblical myth of genesis and various arguments for the existence

of God. All this in a philosophical framework - quite challenging for students, if not, in my opinion, sometimes controversial - aimed at pushing students towards engaging and confronting the epistemological coherence of 'science' and 'religion'. Actually, the epistemological coherence of religion is merely represented by the philosophical arguments for the existence of a Creator God in Christianity.

We can shade further light on the logic of such approach in RE if we look at the underlying epistemological approach adopted.

3.4.4 Epistemological underpinnings

Wright constantly reminds his readers (see e.g. 2000: 23-5, 2004: 52-61; Wright *et alii* 2019: 2) that the perspective adopted in his RE is critical realism, a philosophical approach associated with British philosopher Roy Bhaskar (1944–2014). In a nutshell, critical realism adopts an ontological realism in which reality is deemed to exist independently of human perception. Knowledge of this reality is contingent and limited but not completely arbitrary, it is always subject to revision but nevertheless open to constant improvement. In fact, it is argued that the knowledge of the world is possible and it can be based on informed and rational judgment. What is peculiar in Wright's take on critical realism, however, 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. (2000: 25)

This 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)

To get straight to my point, it makes no sense for Wright to talk about insiders or outsiders because, as already hinted above, religious persons, agnostics or even atheists are at the same level in their holding beliefs and/or certain positions about the ultimate-state-of-things. Even scientists or any pursuer of academic knowledge are involved in the same terms, because they "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" (2004: 52). In other words, 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 or description of religious phenomena, theories on religion\s, etc.) can be produced and discussed, but as sources of knowledge themselves on the ontological nature of reality, and on the way to acts and behave accordingly to such nature (cfr. 2004: 182-3, 2007: 148, Wright *et alii* 2019: 2-3). From this perspective, religious practices are nothing more than the practical embodiment of a core of fundamental beliefs on the metaphysical dimension of reality, which faithful individual adopts in order to carry on what is called as "truthful living".

This is also evident in the proposed introductory scheme of work by Wright *et alii* (2019: 19-39), which acts as the 'theoretical foundations' for further RE lessons. Here the proposed style of enquiry does not address religion and religions as such. Indeed, we have seen how both Wright and Barnes engage the question of the definition of religion or religions but, at least with Wright, it seems to me that the discussion remains at the level of the theoretical justification for presenting religion as coherent wholes. That is, the theoretical problem of "what is religion?" does not enter in the work in class. To be fair, Barnes does touch briefly the issue *en passant* by stating that, even if the definition of religion is not strictly necessary for religious educators, it may be a useful intellectual activity for pupils, albeit at a level adapt to their age and aptitude (2014: 120).

Returning back to the foundational scheme of work for RE proposed by Wright *et alii*, we see that, instead of preliminary defining, or at least problematizing, the idea of religion, it focuses on high-level philosophical-epistemological questions:" 'What is real?' (ontological realism); 'Can we know what is real?' (epistemic relativity); and 'How do we know what is real?' (judgmental rationality)" (19). These questions, together with a proposal of ultimate questions (see above 3.4.2) and of ideal types of worldviews (postmodern, theist, secular and agnostic) constitute the "theoretical tools" pupils are expected to adopt when dealing with religion and other worldview, in order to engage in rational and also critical assessment of their "key fundamental beliefs", on the ground of the rational coherence thereof. Let us observe other examples from Wright *et alii*'s GCSE preparation course proposal on Christianity and Buddhism. First of all, we have already seen that the key baseline questions posed are: "What is the nature of ultimate reality? What is the nature of humanity? How then should we live?" (144). Then, when engaging e.g. the topic of "Nature of God" in Christianity, the guiding question proposed is: "How can a monotheistic God be three in one?" (145). Similarly, when addressing the topic of the three marks of existence in Buddhism, the question is: "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 philosophical-epistemological grounding of his RE proposal, I think it is safe to say that he does not differ too much from Wright. There are some points of departures, such as the idea of differentiating more starkly between religious and non-religious worldviews, as the former address the question of supernatural or transcendental reality, while the latter do not (2014: 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" (2008: 29). Ultimately, the question of 'truth' and in particular the 'truths' expressed by religion is pivotal also in Barnes: "In an important sense the religions are in competition with one another over the nature of reality (they enshrine and express different truth claims)" (2014: 213). At the same time, while religions are ultimately incommensurable between each other (240) - and this is one of the main arguments of Barnes against the "liberal RE paradigm" according to which every religion is equally true - the common point of reference is the divine plane to which all religions are supposed to address. In other words, even if the idea of divine expounded may be different (cfr. 122), religions are, after all, "contrasting sets of beliefs (which *purport to 'reveal' the same divine being and mediate salvation*)" (213, my italics). Moreover, we find the same appeal to a critical engagement to religions belief on rationalistic-philosophical grounds as we did for Wright. For Barnes religions are "set of beliefs shared by adherents of the same religious worldview *that can be assessed for their coherence*" (126, my italics). 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, my italics)

Now that we have highlighted the epistemological underpinning of this kind of RE approach, we can shift and frame what we have discussed in broader educational terms, starting with the issue of didactic transposition.

3.4.5 Didactic transposition

From the discussion in the previous sections, it would seem that, in the RE proposed by Wright and Barnes, the main *savoirs* taken as reference are not, strictly speaking, scholarly knowledges in

the sense of intellectual endeavors of research and enquiry focused on a specific field, whose results are discussed, negotiated and legitimated accordingly to certain standards set by the scientific community. Instead, these *savoirs* seem to be no other than the various religions' doctrines, taken, so to speak, 'at face value'. In other words, since for Barnes and Wright religions are ultimately ways of knowing ultimate reality and prescribing practices (rituals and ethics) that fit coherently with said reality, these knowledges are what should be didactically transposed. Indeed, this approach seems coherent with one typical practice of the *noosphere* in UK when it comes to RE, i.e. the involvement, through the institution of the Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE), of the representatives of the locally present religious traditions in drafting the RE syllabi (see above 3.2.1).

However, in the case of the rational-theological RE, we have at least one striking difference from the didactic transpositions of subjects such as, say, history or biology. In these cases, pupils are introduced into disciplines purported to progressively shade light - through a series of internal debates and variety of perspectives - on a given subject matter, be they the past events and deeds of human communities, or the functioning of biological life. Also in case of school subjects which are actually a bundle of different academic disciplines, such as socio-economic sciences as in the case of France, or natural sciences in many school systems, different academic disciplines are supposed to address in a complementary way a common subject matter, such as human society or natural environments. Instead, 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 are not the "religious knowledges", i.e. knowledges 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 or may not be truthful or coherent instances.[49] As far as Wright is concerned, such general *savoir* of reference is not explicitly addressed to as such, but the relative *forma mentis* that his RE is supposed to foster is described in various ways:

> 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).

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[49] Cfr. Barnes (2014): "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 in certain respects*" (213, my italics). Cfr. also Wright *et alii* who, concerning the position of agnosticism, state that "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).

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. (2004: 167)

With Barnes, instead, we found some more explicit discussions about which discipline should be considered as the reference for RE. He straightforwardly argues in favor of theology (2018)[50] and his argument goes as follows: under the influence of modernity (urbanization, secularization, individualization and so on) religious identity is mostly a matter of choice among competing options. Therefore, the educational challenge is to enable pupils to make responsible, self-critical decisions about their ultimate commitments and values, and to equip people with necessary knowledge and skills to make such responsible decisions about religious truth (that corresponds, as we have seen, to propositional beliefs) "clearly draws theology naturally into our discussion" (127). This is 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). In other words, for Barnes, educators must be theologically equipped in order to appreciate the beliefs as truth-claims and their web of interrelationship within a given religion. Wright too, more or less implicitly, acknowledges such role of theology: "for CRE 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" (Wright *et alii* 2019: 127). More starkly, also in contraposition to the epistemological recommendations of CoRe's 2018 Repor,[51] they recommend instead "producing high calibre philosophical and theological study, rather than reducing our subject to social science"(vii).

These discussions on theology's role in RE allow us to conclude that, for Barnes as for Wright, the fundamental knowledge of reference is this kind of capacity of rationally and existentially inquire over matters of transcendence. Only in a second moment, then, the various truth-claims of religions can be discursively assessed and, consequently, endorsed or not. I venture to label such knowledge as "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).

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[50] To be fair, Barnes concedes that also religious studies should be taken as reference for RE, however he also argues that it is because of religious studies' influence (that is: phenomenology) that British RE ended to endorse liberal protestant theological view that - wrongly - treats any religious as equivalent truths. Moreover, he contends that also religious studies, even if with more inner variety, involve normative commitments and therefore should not be absolutely distinguished from theology.

[51] In the preface of Wright et alii (2019: vii) we read that when the CoRe's Report (CoRe 2018) has been published the manuscript was already completed, so authors have not been able to acknowledge outside minor updates.

Indeed, adopting the point of view of the epistemological dimension of didactic transposition (cfr. above 2.3.1) we can clearly see that the fundamental postulate of this RE approach is that it is possible (and appropriate) to rationally inquiry over the nature of metaphysical reality (or non-existence thereof). Coherently, the methods, the language and the keys concept are those of philosophical investigation: inductive *vs* deductive arguments, verification principle, inference, the relationships between ontology, epistemology and ethics, and so on (cfr. e.g. Wright *et alii* 2019: 3ʳᵈ and 4ᵗʰ chs.). Similarly, from the point of view of the learner dimension (cfr. above 2.3.3), the previous knowledges expected to be primarily activated and engaged are not the cognitive competences concerning data on various religions information, but the very personal religious or not-religious perspectives of pupils (cfr. 141-42). Data and information from various religious traditions are, so to speak, the 'samples' with which exercising such theological competences.

Having identified the fundamental knowledge of reference of this RE, we can move on to discuss the educational significance of this approach.

3.4.6 Educational perspective

It should be clear by now that, for the rational-theological approach, the main educational objective, i.e. and the main competence to be gained by pupils, consist in the capacity to make self-critical and self-conscious choice concerning their views on matter of metaphysical reality, of relative ethics and being able to provide reason for these choices. In the framework of the two main educational aims of British RE, namely "learning about religion" and "learning from religion", we may conclude that in this case the former, i.e. to know data and information on various religious traditions, is clearly in function of the latter, in the sense of addressing directly one's own religious worldview. We can see this more in detail from the four criteria for assessment laid out by Wright *et alii* (2019: 167-69). The first one is called *attentiveness*, and refers to the accuracy in which "beliefs, practices, concepts and issues" are explored by the students, while engaging their own worldviews with the new perspectives shared. Next, we have the criterion of *depth*, which refers to how pupils engage the ways of understanding the nature of reality with "sufficient, appropriate and challenging variations and interpretations". Criteria then begin to further shift from "learning about" to "learning from" with *discernment* i.e. how much pupils are able to offer balanced and substantiated arguments in their evaluation of both own and others' views on ultimate truth. The last criterion is called *responsibility*, and refers to the issue of "truthful living", i.e. the coherence with beliefs hold and behavior adopted, an aspect that, as admitted by the authors themselves, goes beyond the remit of the teacher to assess,

but is nonetheless advocated as a way to go beyond a "customary understanding of 'learning from'" (168).

This last criterion shows also how the ethical dimension is pivotal in the general educational perspective adopted by this kind of RE. In the case of Wright et *alii* 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 philosophical tools to identify sources of moral decision making and to evaluate consistency, strengths and weaknesses of both religious (called by them "theistic") and non-religious ethical systems. The same applies to Barnes, which laments in various occasions how RE has been divorced from moral education and strongly suggests reinstating this aspect in the discipline, arguing that religious traditions are to be engaged as the main sources of ethical guidance (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 (2018: 128).

In asking ourselves which may be the social practices of reference in this rational-theological RE approach, on the base of the previous discussions I would propose two practices. First of all, the first practice I individuate is no other than *being a self-conscious religious practitioner*. As Wright *et alii* say, "[...] nor is it sufficient for students to merely express an unjustified personal preference for one belief system or another" (3). There is, however, an important specification to be made: in this case we are speaking of a well-precise conception of what it means to be religious, that is: with a strong intellectual component, focused on propositional beliefs as expressed in authoritative texts, and with the assumption that a very strong differentiation between religions does exist. From this latter it follows the relative assumption that affiliation to a religious tradition is very likely to be exclusive of all the others, otherwise one would result to be 'incoherent'. Non-religious worldviews are also taken into consideration on the same level because they too are conceived as endorsing a view of transcendent reality. Pupils holding such positions, therefore, are similarly asked to explore and argue for their views. These ideas of 'comparing', 'arguing for' and 'defending' one's own worldview are quite reiterated. Together with our conclusion on the "natural theology" as the primary discipline of reference, this leads me to hypothesize that Wright and Barnes, more or less consciously, have in mind a second social practice of reference, even if it would sound, admittedly, somehow 'outdated'. Nonetheless it seems like that our authors implicitly argue for this practice to be more spread throughout society. I would label it as "theological debating", and we find a perfect instance of this in the learning materials sold in bundle with Wright *et alii* 2019, in particular, in the materials linked to the implementation of an introductory series of lessons. In these materials teachers are invited to organize a "R.E. boxing" (*sic*) activity. It starts with an example of a theological debate about the existence of a transcendent God between two hypothetical children, respectively holding a theist and

a secularist view. Afterwards, pupils are invited to enter in a debate on the issue of which worldview, theist, secularist or postmodern one, is correct. No procedures for electing a winner of this debate are set. It is proposed to carry on a debriefing at the end in which each pupil indicates the two best arguments that have been pushed forward for each of the worldviews proposed.

3.5 English RE: Existential-instrumental approach
3.5.1 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 is active in the field of RE since the mid-1990 up to the present 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 and Erricker 2000, Erricker 2001, 2007) which are characterized, we will see, by a radical postmodern, deconstructionist bent, which came to me mitigated afterwards, but nonetheless still present.

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's presently active in the debate often writing alongside with Biesta, a renowned scholar in the field of education (see e.g. Biesta & Hannam 2019a). Is worth noting that they critically reviewed the above discussed (3.2.4) 2018 Report *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward* for putting too much emphasis on subject knowledge instead of the existential meaning of religion (Biesta & Hannam 2019b).

Indeed, the reasons for the choice of the term "existential", at least concerning Hannam's approach, will be self-evident while exploring her proposal. Concerning the work of Erricker taken in exam, it presents itself in a different manner, i.e. using the wording: "conceptual approach". Indeed, this work represents for Erricker a sort of evolution from previous, more radical works, in which he argued that RE should give space for the "little narratives" of the children (their personal religious/'spiritual' experience) to be explored and developed without being subsumed or even in contrast with the "great narratives", i.e. the orthodoxies of the religious traditions. He acknowledges the excessive radicalism of his previous works and explains how the conceptual approach manages to dialogue with the critiques received and the curricular recommendation at national level (Erricker 2010: 79-80). However, as we will see, he considers his previous research on the experience-based, personal - often

called also "existential" or "spiritual'" - development of children as still relevant and underpinning also his 2010 work (cfr. 71-7).

The second reason why I put these two authors together also explains the 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' development of the pupils. In other words, in their RE proposal, religion seems less an *object* and more of a *project*.

The last reason for treating these two authors together lies in the fact that, as a proof of the convergence of their perspectives, they have actually 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.

3.5.2 Concept of religion

We cannot find in Erricker's monograph an explicit treatment of the concept of religion in itself, nor any explicit reference to a theory of religion underpinning his approach. However, we may discern some more information on his take on the problem of religion from the very methodological foundation of his approach. He calls it "conceptual approach" because it is fundamentally based on three classes of concepts that the pupils are expected to study and engage in a progressively manner, i.e. starting from the so-called type A concepts, then passing to the type B ones and then to the type C. Type A concepts pertain to a generic realm of human experience (i.e. common to both religious and not religious experience) and are devised in order to permit the children to easily and personally relate to. Erricker provides us with some examples, which he considers not exhaustive. These are: "suffering", "loyalty", "belief", "hope", "devotion", "community", "sacrifice", "environmentalism", "love", "justice", "power" or "authority" (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"[52] (*ib.*). Type C concepts are instead those are peculiar to discrete religious traditions. While I will deal with this type of concepts in the next section concerning representation

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[52] 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 much tailored on Abrahamic religions.

of religions, here it is sufficient to say that they are presented as forming the basis upon which one can understand "the way in which a particular tradition makes sense of the world" (91) and as being those concepts, which different branches of a same tradition interpret in various ways (*ib.*). Furthermore, these concepts

> have to be ones *that underpin the beliefs and practices of the religion* in question, not ones that describe the practices themselves. What we are seeking to get at is 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. Tawhid is a key concept in Islam but salat is not. Dukkha is a key concept in Buddhism but puja is not. (92, my italics)

At high level attainments, pupils are expected to interpret a wide range of key concepts specific to the religions studied and to give increasingly complex explanations concerning how concepts within a religion are related to one another. They are also supposed to contextualize such concepts within the beliefs and the practices of the different branches of the tradition of reference. Moreover, they should be able to analyze conceptual differences and similarities within and across religions. Finally, pupils should also "evaluate the concepts by justifying how and why the concepts are important to the lives and values of believers and by analysing how issues arising will affect the wider society" (121).

In summary, it seems that, for Erricker, the best way to conceive religions (as well as non-religious worldviews such as humanism) is engaging 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 religions, used in the study of religion\s (type B). The function of this kind conceptual worldviews is twofold: is an interpretative tool in order to make sense of the world, and at the same time exert an impact on the world. Moreover, these worldviews are in themselves subject to interpretation by branches within traditions, as well as contextualization in various historical and social circumstances (cfr 122, 139, 141 and 171).

At this point, however, taking into consideration that Erricker's position is highly influenced by postmodern critique, we may ask whether 1) he is implicitly putting forth a definition/theory 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 religions seems to understand them 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 interpretation also entails, for example, that not only for the observer, but also for the insider/practitioner, what is really valuable and pivotal are abstract concepts, and not something more concrete, such a ritual or a celebration.

In the second case, instead, it would be consistent with his general philosophical approach above hinted, which is strongly connotated by a constructivist view coupled with a noteworthy postmodern critical attention to grand narratives (Lytoard's *grand recits*), and Foucauldian critiques of authority and representation (cfr. e.g. 2001, see also Alberts 2007: 179-86 for an overview of his earlier works). We may in fact substantiate this second hypothesis by referring to his previous works in which he is explicitly critical and suspicious of any great narrative, from both religious traditions and academic disciplines. For example, we read that

> 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. (2001: 29)

On this background, his earlier work featured a highly child-centered approach in which RE's aims was to have pupils develop their own 'small narratives', avoiding instead perpetuating the grand narratives of both religious orthodoxies and academic disciplines. As a matter of fact, also in the work here under exam, Erricker criticizes Jackson's and Wright's RE for being too narrowly focused on how religions should be best represented, while he praises Grimmit for having built an approach with a more structured didactical ground and a thoroughly reflection on the educational value of RE (Erricker 2010: 63-8, see Alberts 2007:173-79 for an overview of Grimmit's approach). Therefore, we may well conclude that, from his perspective, proposing a theory of religion (or a grand narrative on it) would not make much sense for Erricker. This does not mean, however, that his approach does not implicitly put forth a certain idea of what religion is or even *should be* (see below 3.5.5).

Shifting our attention to Hannam, she discusses three different way to conceptualize religion: the first is religion as *propositional beliefs*, in the sense that being religious means to have certain beliefs and to consider them "Truth" or "real knowledge", which makes these beliefs an important reference point for justifying what it means to be religious (Hannam 2019: 88-92). However, says Hannam, this approach bears unwanted consequences, i.e. that a religious education based on such conceptualization either would end as an indoctrination in said beliefs or as "scientific, objective,

distanced" (Biesta & Hannam 2019a:181) study of it - which, we will see in the following sections, is equally considered unwanted.

The second way to conceptualize religion is as *practice*, in the sense that a religion is something *done*, i.e. a set of practices embedded in one person's life, in accord to a particular rule deemed authoritative. She contends that it is even possible to conceive religion as practice in a pure form, i.e. without resorting to any belief whatsoever. At any rate, an exemplary instance of this way of conceptualizing religion 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 propositional beliefs, in such a way that one may speak of 'secular-religious' Jew. In place of the belief as the real, pivotal knowledge in the previous conceptualization, in this case the sharing, within a group and/or tradition, of the same "care" towards the practices, acts as a kind of beliefs and gives authority to the practice themselves as "spiritual guide" (see 92-5). This approach too may imply unwanted consequences. She argues, together with Biesta (Biesta & Hannam 2019: 181) that 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. In this case the center is "faith", but to be understood as a "trust" (see Hannam 2019: 95-9). Hannam discusses this conceptualization by drawing extensively from authors such as Weil, Merton[53] and 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" (98) and not to a truth "external to the believer" (*ib.*). 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. 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, as 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 example and quotes, but, in summary, it seems to me that, by saying "existential way of being religious", she means a kind of attitude towards a divine plane which is neither totally transcendence nor capturable in a statement of beliefs or set of practices, but which is possible to know/engage by 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 process involves also the development of the identity and

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[53]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.

subjectivity of the 'existential practitioners'. At any rate, in less lofty terms, this existential way of being religious is equally described as:

> ... 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. (Hannam & Biesta 2019a:181)

Hannam also adds that presenting these three ways of being religious in their 'pure' form does not overlook that fact 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), especially when sub-groups and diversity within religion is taken into consideration.

However, referring to Buddhism, Hinduism or Jainism, although she notes that "there may be many elements of tradition or even belief as well" (102) or that "in some places and for some particular manifestations of these traditions faith as propositional belief could have priority", (*ib.*), she nonetheless argues that "best entry point into Buddhism for example may well be through an existential conceptualization of religion" (*ib.*), which is "particularly close to what it means to live a religious life in the Dharmic traditions" (87). Such statements, together with her focus on Christianity when discussing religion as belief, and on Judaism and Islam when discussing religion as practices, suggest that in her view some religions are characterized more by a certain conceptualization than others.

Furthermore, as will be explained in next sections, Hannam contends that the existential conceptualization is the *best way to engage religions in RE*, and this has therefore important implication for the issue of representation of religions.

3.5.3 Representation of religions

We may infer the take on representation on religion in Erricker by examining the choice of type C concepts which, in his view, are the key elements in each religion, from which other ideas and practices stem. However, I would argue that the very choice of individuating *emic conceptual elements as the key aspect* implies automatically that the resulting representations of that religious tradition will have the intellectual dimension foregrounded, at the expenses of other dimensions. Since the focus on present research is on East Asian religions, as an example I cite Erricker's list of

Type C concept of Hinduism (in his romanization): *brahman*, *avatar*, *atman*, *brahmin*, *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, *Shiva*, *murti*, *darshan*, *samsara*, *maya*, *guna*, *moksha*, *yoga*[54], *bhakti yoga*, *jnana yoga*, *karma yoga*, *karma*, *Vedas*, *dharma*, *varna*, *jati*, *ahimsa* (Erricker 2010:115-16, he accompanies each term with a brief explanation). It is clear a nearly total preference toward doctrinal/ soteriological aspects, including also quite technical philosophical elements such as the concept of *guṇa,* which, it should be noted, pertains to a well distinct philosophical system, the *sāṃkhya* (a specification not provided by Erricker). Given the importance, especially from the perspective of the Brahmanical caste, of orthopraxis over orthodoxy (see e.g. Doninger 2009: 43, 63), it is quite singular to suggest to refer to practice exclusively in function - that is, as second order-concept - to doctrinal tenets, and therefore to downplay the possibility to address more 'mundane', but still very important practices, such as the rite of passages known as *samskara*. It could be rebutted that these practices can be addressed in connection with the concept of *dharma*, but the same could be said of the three type of *yoga* which are instead presented as three separate concepts, thus reinforcing my impression of bias in favor of doctrinal or, I venture to say, 'spiritual' aspects.

Not only the focus on conceptual aspects influences the nature of the representations, but also the scope of them, in the sense that the choice of selecting a limited number of key concepts - especially in the case of a tradition diffused and rooted in different parts of the world such as Buddhism - inevitably implies a narrowing of the view. We see, in fact, that Buddhism's key concepts are (in Erricker's romanization): *dukkha*, *tanha*, *anicca*, *anatta*, *nirvana* (*nibbana*), *karma* (*kamma*), *buddha*, *sangha*, *dharma*, *bhavana*, *karuna*, *prajna*, *sila*, *upaya* (115). Apart from noting here the same preference for doctrinal and soteriological aspects, it is evident, by the choice of selecting and adding terms in pāli, and of neglecting pivotal Mahāyāna concepts such as *bodhisattva* or *sukhāvatī*, the focus seems mostly limited to Theravāda Buddhism.[55]

Concerning Hannam, we cannot find relevant examples of representations of religions in her main monograph. We know, however, that she argues that the existential approach is the most appropriate for engaging religions. Therefore, it is easy to conjecture which kind of representation she would propose, especially for Buddhism and Hinduism which she considers especially apt to be examined from an existential perspective. As a confirmation of such conjecture, we may refer to the representations of religions in the Syllabus of Hampshire, Portsmouth Southampton and Isle of Wight Councils entitled *Living Difference III* (Hampshire, Portsmouth Southampton and Isle of Wight

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[54] *Yoga* here does not refer to one of the six orthodox *darśana*, nor to the generic 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.

[55] To which, it should be added, the *pāli* term *bodhisatta* is not indeed extraneous, even if it has not the importance given instead in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Cfr. e.g. Crosby 2014: 23ff, 269-70.

Councils 2016). Since this syllabus retains the conceptual approach of Erricker, the resulting representations will be very much in line with those just discussed above.

Indeed, in the Syllabus's indications on how to study Buddhism it is suggested to start from an overarching question: "*Can meditation help people overcome suffering?*" (49, italics in 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",[56] 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" (*ib.*).

A similar approach can be easily individuated in what concerns Hinduism, with a slightly enhanced focus on philosophical-cosmological issues. 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 furthermore suggested to engage these concepts within a context of environmental issues as well as contemporary astronomy (*ib.*).

3.5.4. Epistemological underpinnings

We have already hinted how, especially for Erricker, to address the epistemological question of "how religion should be studied?" has probably little sense if it is posed within a theoretical framework interested in how the phenomena of religion should be researched in objective, 'academic' manner. Instead, what it is pivotal for Erricker is the question of how religions should be engaged by pupils in schools and how such engagement fulfills those educational aims that should inform RE. I

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[56] I note here that the Syllabus' list of key concepts for Buddhism, differently from Erricker 2010 (115), adds also "enlightenment" (Hampshire, Portsmouth Southampton and Isle of Wight Councils 2016: 69).

shall therefore discuss here Erricker's detailed methodology for actually teaching religions in class, which may be also of didactical[57] interest for my general research scope.

Erricker's methodology - in his words, the "conceptual approach" - proposes cyclic structures of learning made up by five steps, each one corresponding to a certain skill. What follows is a synopsis of his proposal (see in detail 2010: 82-91, 118-22). The skills chosen (from the most basic to the most advanced) are: *communicating*, *applying*, *enquiring*, *contextualizing*, *evaluating*. Since the skill of evaluating is the highest - Erricker draws from Bloom's taxonomy (98, cfr. above 2.3.2) - each cycle should have and overarching key evaluative question which should be progressively enlightened by each step. See also the above-cited overarching questions from the *Living Difference III* syllabus. 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.

One starting point may be the *communicate and apply*, especially in case where the chosen religion-related content may need some preliminary work. This step is a sort of preparatory phase in which pupils start working on a certain concept from their own experience (hence the relevance of type A concepts) in order to prepare them to further development. More in detail, *communicate* means to articulate their views, while *apply* entails that pupils are presented with a context in which applying and justifying their views. Then it moves to *enquiry*. Here there is the encounter with contents directly related to religious traditions, while keeping on with the use of concepts. For example, if communicate and *apply* started with the type B concept "sacred", then in *enquiry* the encounter could be with what is considered sacred by a particular tradition, e.g. the C concept of Tōrāh in the Jewish tradition. It has to be noted, also, that the aim of this step is to outline possible differences between pupils' understanding of sacredness and the interpretations found in the Jewish tradition. This is then linked to the *contextualize* step, which consists basically in adding nuances and further details by putting in a larger picture (e.g. provide links with other belief, practices, institutions) the concept engaged during the *enquiry* phase. Keeping on with the example of sacredness and of Tōrāh, here the investigation should focus of the different approaches to the Tōrāh as sacred text by Orthodox, Ultra-orthodox or reformer. This *contextualize* phase should also raise issues relevant to both the upcoming *evaluate* step and the overarching evaluate question. The final step, called *evaluate*, consists in gauging the value of a certain concept and in providing explanation for such value. It is divided into two types of evaluations. The first is *evaluate within*, i.e. within the context of a certain religious tradition. For example, "to what extent and why the Torah is sacred for Jews" (85). The second is

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[57] As a terminological note, Erricker follows the Anglo-Saxon usage of employing in his writings the term "pedagogy" and "pedagogical" also to indicate theories, methods and devices aimed to short- and medium-term acquisition of knowledge, skill and competences, while I follow the continental usage and refer to the same topics with the term "didactics" and "didactical".

evaluate without, i.e. leaving in this case the focus on a particular context and addressing the type B concept of sacred in more general dimension. For example, asking "to what extent is sacredness important today?" (*ib.*).

An alternative starting point for the cycle is *enquiry*. In this case teachers may want to start directly with a concept related to religion, without any preparatory work. Continuing with the example of Judaism, pupils may engage with an activity entailing description and explanation of the Tōrāh, which will be further deepened in the next *contextualize* step. Here, by resorting to different and larger context(s), more nuances and dimensions of the Tōrāh are explored, e.g. different way in which Jewish applied the Tōrāh in different historical situation. In the following *evaluate* phase, since the focus is a type C concept, the work of the pupils should address the various way in which a certain concept is valued in its relative traditions, e.g. the value of the Tōrāh for Jewish identity (*evaluate within*), or, in a broader perspective, how the Tōrāh helped or hindered Jewish involvement in society (*evaluate without*). This does not mean that, differently from the previous example, a subjective evaluation is neglected. In fact, in the next *communicate* and *apply* step the learner should be asked, always with the example of the Tōrāh, to personally respond to a "normative and prescriptive ethic and way of life that also involves a prescriptive lifestyle and a divinely authored authority" (86). More in detail, *communicate* means to be able to express, describe and explain such responses, while *apply* involve explaining how and why such response relates to and would affect "their own lives, those of others, and wider society" (121).

Finally, it must be noted that the two ways of starting and concluding the cycle are expected to be combined. For example, as the second way of starting the cycle ends at *communicate and apply*, this end may also represent the start of another cycle of learning, following the first way of starting the cycle, which is in fact *communicate and apply.* This is how Erricker proposes to set a progression and refinement of both skills and complexity of concepts studied, i.e. from type A to type C.

This methodology is meant to configure RE as a path towards "religious literacy" and "worldview interpretation". With "religious literacy" he means to go beyond the literalist meaning of a certain word (or any signs) and explore multiple/symbolic (he says "figurative") significations created in a certain context, in order to explore also "the conception of the world that has formed its meaning" (cfr. 122). To give some examples, for Erricker religious literacy means to understand the links between type B. concepts such as *symbolism*, *sacred* and *myth* (132), or the use of the metaphor of the boat within the broader context of Buddhism (136-7). This last example is closely linked to "worldview interpretation", which means to understand the above process in most advanced term, i.e. in the context of a specific worldview. This involves the identification and understanding of the connections between the various Type C concepts in a given religious tradition (or a non-religious-

worldview such as Humanism, see 117-8), including the different interpretation of these concepts (i.e. "sacrament" in Christianity), as well as the specificity of a certain worldview, as it represents an interpretation of human experience in that it elaborates, in its own terms, the various type A concepts connected with human experience in general. A final further step is called "worldview analysis", which 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). We will see in the next section how this detailed methodology and learning approaches works within in his larger educational perspective.

Turning our attention to Hannam, we have already seen (3.5.2) that, in her view, to pose the question "how pupils should study religions?" is inappropriate. Instead, pupils should engage religion from an existential point of view. To understand better her position, however, we need to clarify her broader educational perspective.

3.5.5 Educational dimension

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), in the sense that it should focus on the personal narratives of the individuals, i.e. the construction of meaning that arise from experience, and how these narratives relate to those of the others. In a sentence, RE should be about "interpret[ing] religion in relation to their own and others' experiences" (82). This objective is, in his view, the ideal 'merging' of the two RE national attainment targets of "learning about" and "learning from". On this regard, he laments the predominance of the former and the lack of didactic methodology. For example, he criticizes the locally agreed syllabus for being less concerned with the educational value of RE than with the theological links with established religions, i.e. the question if religions are sufficiently and equally represented (cfr. 25-7). Instead, RE should seek balance between a cognitive engagement ("about religion") and an affective engagement ("from religion"). We may indeed interpret the five skills of the above discussed methodology as addressing these two dimensions: *enquire* and *contextualize* pertain more to learning about religion and address mainly a cognitive development, while *communicate*, *apply* and *evaluate* involve also more personal and subjective reflections.

This emphasis on affective engagement is not justified only on the ground that "effective learning involves young people speaking their mind" (72) but has to be read in light of Erricker's strong constructivism and postmodern critiques that underpin his previous works. According to this critical approach, since all contents-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 dimension) is expected to feed into what Erricker defines both as "spirituality" 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), also through the exploration of the possible connections (responses, stimuli, inspirations, criticisms, etc.) between children's spiritualities/narratives and other narratives, which include both other children's narratives and the great traditions' worldviews incapsulated in the Type C concepts. It is worth noting, at this point, 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, cfr. 72 ff).

In other words, it is safe to say that in Erricker there is 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 (82).

Erricker offers various examples of cycles of learning addressing various topics. In many of them, it is discernible this focus on the above mentioned "larger educational development of the learner", especially in the form of providing some kind of '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* step engages directly with the concept of *saṃsāra* through some verses taken from an Upaniṣad.[58] Afterwards, the *contextualize* step presents an image of Śiva *naṭarāja* as an exemplification of the concept of *saṃsāra*. However, I want to put the attention to the final step, the *evaluation* one, which closes the cycle and highlights its 'spiritual'/existential perspective. 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

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[58] He does not indicate which Upaniṣad and from which translation, but I have been able to identify it as Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 5: 11-3, cfr. the unreferenced translation in Erricker 2010: 103 with that of Olivelle 1998: 429.

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)

Something similar, but with a more explicit theological orientation, is represented by a second cycle of learning, which is suggested to be paired with the one on *saṃsāra*. The key evaluative question is: "Could God have made a better job of designing people if he hadn't invented free will?"(105).

Apart from these more 'spiritual'/existential aspects of the "larger educational development of the learner", the political/ideological elements are not absent. We find in Erricker also an interesting discussion of RE's broad educational aims within a secular, liberal context. His argument (cfr. 177-81) basically brings our attention to the dilemma inherent in liberalism. He argues that we are in a situation 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 ways of life, religiously informed or not, conform to those values. In other words, liberal pluralism, while trying to accommodate ways of life different from itself, cannot renounce to certain principles (not empirically universal), such as human rights and democratic process. That RE is perceived as a highly sensible and contested subject, argues Erricker, is also due to the fact that such dilemma is much more evident in this subject, compared to other ones, which brings to another dilemma for the actual practice of RE: should it be the arena for attestation or contestation of religious truths, values and practices? or should contribute to cohesion by promoting toleration and respect of diversity? Erricker proposes a 'third way', in the sense that RE should aim at fostering a '*modus vivendi'* that tries to reconcile intimations of rival traditions, without claiming to any universal authority. Therefore, it is more like an ongoing project, and therefore not a "matter of academic debate but an enquiry in which we should involve our students" (180). That is, it involves negotiation on issues that now people face and pupils, as future adults, will inherit. And such negotiation, for the very reason that it has often to operate on the level of discomfort, due to difference in views, is what is necessary for an effective and durable community cohesion, instead of mere and pleasant celebration of diversity. All this means that part of the RE project is to help pupils determine their values position.

However, I also observe that, in relation the above cited reflections, Erricker cannot escape from an instrumental use of the religious materials. In fact, while discussing his proposal for a "worldviews analysis" exercise to be performed by pupils, he proposes an analytic grid with two axes. The first axis is "religious-secular", but we are given no parameters on which gauging if a worldview is

'religious'.[59] Then he proposes the axis "faith-ideology", and he does so, he tells us, in consideration of the fact that various sub movements within a certain religion could find themselves in really different position (es. evangelical Christian right and liberation theology). With this he means to show the complexity inherent in worldview analysis (cfr. 192-93). The critical issue at this point, however, is that Erricker, in arguing that RE should address both positive and negative aspect of religion or any other non-religious worldview, 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)

Further clarification on these matters can be found in his earlier, more radical writings. He defines, or better, reconstrues faith as "willed commitment to a non-institutionalized entity or being" (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. (2007: 58)

One of the aims of RE is, in fact,

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 & Erricker 2000: 66).

So, on the base of these and of previous observations, it seems to me 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 – emotions, values, motivations etc., in a thoroughly personal, 'spiritual' stance that informs one's positions in social moral and political matters. RE is in charge of the development in pupils of such a "faith", which is processual and always provisional, and has to be constructed both inter-subjectively (between various personal narratives) and by

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[59] In consideration of Erricker's stance on this kind of theoretical issues, probably such question has little relevance in his perspective.

encounter with other religious or not religious sources. These latter, since this process is not to be constrained by a pre-imposed conformity (i.e. ideology), have to be considered as having the same authority of personal narratives.

Returning to Erricker 2010, we find something similar. Indeed, it seems that, in his view, within a same tradition some currents may be characterized by more positive, i.e. faith-oriented, aspects, and other by more negative, ideology-oriented aspects. These latter currents, therefore, are amenable to criticism also at the doctrinal level. 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? (176, my italics)

We see clearly that there is a stark, value-laded differentiation between a "liberating" and "faith-oriented" doctrinal position, and a "repressing" or "ideology-oriented doctrinal position". Here RE does not limit itself to record different theological positions and possibly interpret them from ethical or political point of view. The fact that Erricker's RE seems pursuing also a theological/ideological critique of certain doctrines, while implicitly upholding other ones because of their 'liberatory possibilities', resonates with the postmodern 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, we will see how, 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. Indeed, she affirms that RE, as banal as this statement may be, "should be *educational*", and that "the educational interest is first and foremost *existential*" (Biesta & Hannam 2019: 176 italics in original), in the sense of allowing the pupils to exist in the world as subjects of their own life, instead than as an object of external ideas, plans or intentions. It is less a question of identity and more a question of being free to *act* within the world, and Hannam frames this concept drawing from Arendt's philosophy (Hannam 2019: 76-86, Hannam & Biesta 2019: 177-80).

According to the philosopher, says Hannam, human *action* means, first of all, the mode in which human beings appear to each other, not as physical objects, not as social animals with same

physiological (food, sleeping...) and socio-economical needs (work, shelter...) but as unique individuals, and this 'appearing' marks their own beginning - in Arendt's term, their "natality". It is not, however, a single event like a physical birth, but such actions are to be understood in terms of human beings continuously bringing new beginnings into the world through their words and deeds. The choice of getting into this 'action' is not dependent on reason also, but also on volition and desire. Furthermore, as other people must also be considered, the choice of action has a relational nature. The human being or agent, therefore, is a subject in a twofold sense, i.e. s/he is both who begins an action, and who suffers from and is subject from the consequence of said action, consequences derived from the unpredictable response to her/his beginnings from other human beings. This situation may be frustrating, but at the same time such unpredictability (i.e. uncontrollability) of human action is the very condition for the "natality" of each unique person to take place. In this sense, for Arendt action is radically situated in plurality, as it requires the exposure to who and what is other. 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 way of conceptualizing, by means of Arendt's philosophy, 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 subjective/lived experience, in the sense of an increased attentiveness to one's own existence in the world. In this way, says Hannam, one is pushed towards a "goodness which is beyond our power in this life to explore, but which we know insofar as our exploration reveals it" (Hannam 2019: 97, cfr. also above 3.5.2). This kind of being religious is, in Hannam views, basically 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" (Biesta & Hannam 2019a: 182). Therefore, such religious life is the expression *par excellence* of political life, this latter understood as a way of living with other equal, but at the same time unique, human beings. From a religious perspective, such exposition to the world and to the otherness represented by the "natalities/beginnings" of other people resembles a kind of "revelation" (*ib.*), which speaks to the individual and calls for its response and engagement. From an educational/political perspective, living a life being exposed to the beginnings of others who

take up, interrupt and transform one's own very beginnings, "is to be committed to a common world in which there is an opportunity for everyone to begin" (183).

In summary, since the existential way of being religious recognizes the importance of the subject, i.e. of every unique child projected in the world, and resonates with the Arendtian indication of action in the plurality/public sphere, "existential religious education will be best understood as the cultivation in the child of a mode of being in the world" (Hannam 2019: 132). And since for Hannam RE must be first and foremost educational, RE should address religious traditions in such 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, my italics highlight a quote from Hampshire, Portsmouth Southampton & Isle of Wight Councils 2016: 4).

In more practical/didactical terms, this approach of RE, apart upholding the necessity for an existential understanding of religion, indicates three general methodological steps or thresholds to be reached by pupils. These are "attention", "intellectual humility" and "discernment" (cfr. 124-34), which are inspired by Weil's philosophy and are furthermore defined as possible exemplifications of the existential religious path.[60] The first step means bringing the pupil to "attend not only to something but [...] also [...] to someone new" (125), i.e. outside the immediate family/familiarity, in order to interrupt the ordinary flow of his/her life and thus making possible the engagement with the public sphere. The second step means to engage, inquire and explore further and more in detail what s/he is "attending" to, but "without prejudgment" (132). The next and 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. In this way, says Hannam, the pupil's attention is focused on the way in which s/he exists in the world and this means "enabling her to find her own life view so she can make choices about how to live" (133).

In conclusion, we can see, in Erricker as in Hannam, how the broader educational framework highly influences the way in which religions should be engaged and studied. That is, the way in which issues such as 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 also 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 to do that. We have seen indeed in Erricker a sort of 'anatomy' of religious traditions in their

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[60] "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).

key conceptual points, so that pupils may engage them intellectually, exploring the links between concepts or between concepts and other 'secondary' aspects such as practices. At the same time, however, pupils are expected to evaluate and apply such concepts in their very life. Furthermore, we have seen how such personal work by the pupils should ideally foster a "faith" which is anti-ideological, liberatory, focused on social justice. Unsurprisingly, this idea of "faith" is not so different[61] from Hannam's idea of faith as "trust" that pushes forward the self into existence. In her case we find a more explicit statement that religious education should engage religion in existential terms because this way of engaging religion (more as a *project* than as an *object*) is conductive to a desirable educational result, that is, leading an active life in the public sphere in the terms theorized by Arendt.

3.5.6 Didactic transposition

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. We will also briefly touch the question of which are the social practices of reference that may guide their didactic transposition, albeit we have already indirectly hinted at them in the previous sections.

Starting with Erricker, we find a seemingly contradictory position. We have already seen that he is critical of a RE too much focused on propositional contents, i.e. narrowly focused on how religions should be best represented, instead of asking how these contents should be engaged by pupils. In other words, Erricker wants to give RE a *disciplinarity*, i.e. what characterizes other school subjects as discipline. For example, as History (cfr. Erricker 2010: 96). In fact, he points out that "history teachers understand themselves to be historians and the purpose of their teaching to be that of developing their pupil's abilities to perform the same role [...]" (99) and that it should be "an interesting undertaking to try and provide a similar paragraph to the above for RE teachers" (*ib.*). Unfortunately, Erricker does not seem to explicitly provide such paragraph. Quite the contrary, the conceptual approach he proposes is, in his own words, "free of epistemological restrictions such that it may provide the basis of an inclusive operational curriculum for RE open to different approaches" (86).

We may better understand his position if we take into account that he considers RE as deriving from religious studies, but in his understanding these latter include a very broad multidisciplinary

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[61] It is not a case that both authors, who I have labeled also as "existential", do draw often from the work of Kierkegaard. Cfr. e.g. Erricker 2001: 32ff.

approach: "sociological, phenomenological, philosophical, psychological, ethical and theological" (95). Secondly, we must again keep in mind his 'postmodern/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 (falsely independent, in his opinion) reality. Indeed, it is evident how, 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. In other words, we find that for the examples on Christianity the theological approach is the most suggested (cfr. 105-6, 145-9, 160-2); for examples on Islam and Judaism, it is the socio-anthropological one (cfr. 125-7; 149-55, 162-4); and for Hinduism and Buddhism, the experiential-philosophical one (pp. 102-5, 155-9)[62]. In other words, I interpret this move as a further instrumental use of religious materials, in order to have the pupils better engage (encounter, study and apply to themselves) 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 other. 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 the religious studies, but understood as 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 (see above examples from Hinduism and Christianity) seems particularly apt to offer an introduction 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 'narratives' and being able to respond to the 'narratives' of others. This objective, at this point, is also what we can identify as the social practice of reference. That is, a kind of 'personal' or 'spiritual' development, in which children (consistently with the postmodern attitude of Erricker) should freely and creatively interpret and respond to religious (and also non-religious) doctrines, beliefs and practices, in order to construct (or better keep constructing and reconstructing) their own worldviews at various levels, from metaphysical to political, from social to psychological.

Turning our attention to Hannam, we note the following points. First of all, her preference for the existential approach in RE runs parallel with a skepticism towards a content/knowledge-based

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[62] 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"). Cfr. above 3.5.2.

education (see also Biesta & Hannam 2019b: 6-7). As hinted above, human action, in Arendt's view, is guided by volition and desire as much as it is from knowledge and reasoning (cfr. 76ff). Similarly, "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?'" (*ib.*). 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, from her point of view, the *savoirs* of reference for RE cannot but be the very religions themselves, without any mediation of objectifying disciplines such as history or anthropology. However, she acknowledges that this would be a step back into a "previous phase of civilization" (*ib.*), i.e. confessionalism. This latter motivation accounts also for her refusal of approaching religions as system of belief or practice. We have seen as this would end, in her view, as *indoctrination* or *recruitment* (187, see above 3.5.2). The existential approach, therefore, is the only way to address the problem of the "loss of religion from religious education" caused by the "rejection of confessionalism" (180).

In summary, we are safe to conclude that in Hannam's approach the *savoirs* of reference need to be the knowledge represented by the religious traditions themselves, with the caveat of being interpreted from an existential point of view. In order to do this, no other *savoirs savants* dealing with religion can be of support, due to their objectifying tendence, except from philosophy (or better to say, a certain strands of philosophy) and theology, as the only disciplines that may bring the required self-involvement (i.e. existential involvement) of the inquiring subject. 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 (cfr. Hampshire, Portsmouth Southampton & Isle of Wight Councils 2016: 8, 11, 27, 43, 51, 54, 55, 59, 60).

In conclusion, 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 itself. A social/political life that, addressed in its foundations, is interpreted in terms of a *vita activa* (to borrow the title of the famous Arendt's essay) in the public sphere. Leading such *vita activa* is, in Hannam perspective, equivalent to leading also an existential-religious life, in a kind of 'mysticization' of said social/political life.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter we have gone through a short history of the RE development in England to focus then our attention on the different ways of theorizing and practicing RE as proposed by six authors which I have (for the sake of argumentation and in order to highlight some common and predominant traits) regrouped in three strands: "interpretative-dialogical", "rational-theological", "existential-instrumental".

Concerning the historical context, we have seen how the religious organizations had traditionally maintained a certain bond with RE, also 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 a multifaith education instead than of a strictly secular, non-confessional subject (cfr. 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 the Church of England, furthermore, in a position of greater decisional power than other religions. Therefore, even if U.K. in general and English RE in particular are often indicated *as non-confessional religious education* (see above 3.1), this categorization can be accepted but with some qualifications, especially when the criteria are not only institutional, but also related to the educational contents and aims. Given the peculiar position of the Church of England, and the resilience, at least until late 90s, of certain discourses linking religious education with certain "British values" (see Jackson 2004: 22-38) we may even say that Pajer's "political-concordatarian" polarization is not completely absent (see above 3.1).

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 meaning and purpose in life, beliefs about God, ultimate reality, issues of right and wrong and what it means to be human" (REC 2013: 14, see above 3.2.3), 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, see above 3.2.2). This intersection of the theological plane with the 'experiential'

one can be seen in those development of RE during the 80's, 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 (cfr. above 3.4.2). We may see at work here what Jensen T. and Kjeldsen' call "small-c confessional RE" (see above 3.1).

We have also seen that, prompted by institutional reports focused on some critical issues in RE, a Commission on Religious Education (CoRe see above 3.2.4) 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 the other institutional documents, in fact, 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.

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 is closely related with the questions of the conceptualization, representation and epistemology of religion.

Jackson proposes his three-layered matrix of individual/membership group(s)/larger tradition and stresses that talking about 'religion', just like 'culture', means referring to complex phenomena, with internal differentiations, whose borders furthermore, are fuzzy, always shifting, negotiated and contested (see above 3.3.2). Socio-anthropological approaches are then suggested as the best suited epistemological paradigms, and representations of real-life expression of religions are preferred (3.3.3. and 3.3.4). For Wright and Barnes, instead, religion is to be better conceived as a set of truth claims, systematically connected among them, concerning the ultimate nature of things (3.4.2). Therefore philosophical-theological types of inquiry, especially on doctrinal texts, are proposed as essential (3.4.3). Erricker and Hannam propose further 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 (3.5.1). Furthermore, their proposal is less concerned on *what religion is* from an *objective-scientific point of view*, and more on how *religion should be studied* by pupils from an *educational point of view* (3.5.3).

Indeed, we have seen how different conceptions of religions work in tandem with different educational perspectives. For Jackson and O'Grady, RE is meant to foster in the pupils the capacity to interpret different forms of (religious) life, moving forth and back between their perspectives and those of the 'others' (be them insiders portrayed in textbook or other classmates), so that their own background may come to be seen in a different light. All 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 (3.3.5). For Wright and Barnes RE should instead 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 accordingly from the relevant sources the guidance for their ethical behavior (3.4.6). With Erricker and Hannam, we have seen how the educational perspective is of paramount importance. For the former, RE should not only concern with the cognitive aspect of grasping the key concepts of the various religions and applying them in the interpretation and evaluation of various religious phenomena, 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 equivalent or least as leading towards an active political life in the public sphere, RE should expose pupils to such a way of being religious so that these may be meaningful and inspiring to them in both religious, educational and political sense (3.5.5).

We can see, in all these educational perspectives, some degrees of what Pajer indicates as the "ethics/values-based" polarization, albeit in this case there can be seen different axiologies behind each author. Given the emphasis on intercultural dialogue, upholding of human rights and in general a tighter professional connection with supranational institutions such as the CoE, Jackson and O'Grady's 'polarization' is the closest to Pajer's original formulation (see above 3.1).

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, at various level, the effects 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 e.g. linking religious material to their existential questions and foster in this way their motivation, involvement and - in 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 to lead an "authentic" religious life. In this sense, then, we may say that all these authors are also adopting practices characterizable as "life-world-related RE", which, as Frank and Bochinger explain (see above 3.1) employs a "you-position" and addresses directly the personal situation of the individual pupil.

Another common trait may be found also 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 feature of religion in all 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'. Finally, to a certain extent, all authors select or give centrality only to certain modalities of studying religions, which are deemed more apt to help reaching their educational goals: e.g. some preferer more ethnography-oriented modalities of enquiry, others more philosophically-oriented ones, others privilege a focus on texts, others a focus on lived religions, others again a focus on existential or ethical themes, others are more keen to refer to academic disciplines while others less, and so on.

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We have concluded our close-reading examination of the main RE approaches in England. Apart from some preliminary evaluations here and there, I have limited myself to put in the foreground the main elements and the inner logic of them. This means that I still have to discuss in detail the extent in which the theoretical and practical aspects of these RE models are more or less 'compatible', or more or less 'insightful' within the context of a thoroughly study of religion\s-based approach, aimed towards intercultural education, with a focus on the theme of East Asian religions.

I can anticipate how certain elements are surely worthy of interest, such as the three-layered matrix of Jackson, the five steps methodology of Erricker, or the warning to avoid endorsing an implicit inclusivist theology in RE from Wright and Barnes. Others need a more critical and contextualized discussion, such as the focus on the 'spiritual'/existential development of the pupils or their 'theological literacy'. These elements, albeit problematic, suggest nonetheless a didactical and pedagogical issue probably inescapable in RE, i.e. the likelihood that pupils will also engage RE topics as resources of meaning for their personal worldviews.

At any rate, before engaging in this kind of discussion, since we have already laid our theoretical and normative frames concerning religion and education, all we are left to do is to set out and explore in the next chapter the relevance of the theme of East Asian religion for a study of religion\s-based integrative RE, a relevance which I have identified under the form of two 'challenges'.

CHAPTER 4: EAST ASIAN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS – TWO CHALLENGES

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to identify and discuss those factors that I deem relevant in order for a treatment of East Asian religious traditions to be comprehensive and nuanced as possible and to avoid possible appropriation and accommodation to Euro-American modern cultural perspectives, especially in regard to the focus of our study, i.e. integrative RE. 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 chapter 1 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 the broad field of East Asian religions. My aim is to highlight two needs. First, of being wary of the inadequacy of what I call "Modern Euro-centric/ Christian-centric epistemologies". Secondly, of taking into account the historical-cultural entanglement 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 a same complex issue. In a nutshell, modern Christian-centric epistemologies not only represent 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 colonized people understood and acted upon these religious traditions, thus engendering 'modern' variations and interpretations that reinforced, and still reinforce, modern Euro-American expectations, in particular in 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.

4.2. First Challenge: inadequacy of the Euro-centric/ Christian-centric epistemologies

We have seen in 1st chapter how, through its development, 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 as 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". With such "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, 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 to 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 said '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 of 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 East Asian traditions. First, the aspect of discreteness, in the sense of exclusive affiliation and adherence by practitioners, of having distinct doctrines and practices, and of having a general tendence to maintain a high degree of 'purity' and separation between both religious traditions, and between 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 as 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 practitioner as the fundamental dimension in which the relationship with a transcendent "sacred" takes place. This automatically implies the downplay of the exterior, 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 authentical root of any religion has fostered certain cultural developments according to

which this dimension of religiosity can paradoxically be extrapolated from religions themselves, and even put in contrast with them, thus creating the rhetoric of "spirituality *vs* religion".

4.2.1 Inadequacy of the paradigm of religious traditions as discrete, separate entities

We have already seen (1.7.2) 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" (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 rose 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" (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" (2003: 11).

While this have 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 this cliché is disseminated, unnoticed and undiscussed can be gauged in seemingly unrelated contexts, such as demographic census or surveys, which, among job or instruction information, mostly ask to "check one (and only one) religion", and therefore contribute 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, in reality it betrays "traces of its historical links with Christianity" (372). Modern state law, "like religion, has its own approach to reality, its own epistemology, hermeneutics, even its own aesthetics" (374), and ultimately has also its own implicit theologies, often reproducing general protestant features (cfr. 373). 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.

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Given this situation, it is not surprising that, when discussing epistemological problems in studying religion outside euro-American contexts, notably in China – but also Japan –, scholars indicate as a major issue the fact that "the exclusivist orientation and emphasis on institutional membership so prominent in the West lack cultural significance within Chinese society" (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.

For this reason, i.e. the fact that it is epistemologically pointless to sort out which tradition this or that person belongs to, Chau (2011, 2019: 23-33) proposes instead to substitute the "conceptual fetishes" of Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism with a framework that focuses of 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*.[63] 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 said modalities. Moreover, while it is common to find people preferring one or two 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 Daoist ceremony on behalf of the hiring community, usually a blessing to ensure a prosperous renewing of the life-cycle (cfr. Andersen 2008). At the same time, many participants will have their deceased buried in accordance with Buddhist funeral rites. 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 (cfr. Sutton 2004). The third modality is the *personal-cultivational* one, involving a long-term interest in cultivating and transforming oneself.

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[63] I would argue that Chau's five modalities, in their being transversal to various religious traditions, can aptly be applied also to the Japanese context.

People interested in this modality usually have particular 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.[64] 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 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 the clan's ancestors, when family members will bring offerings and burn incense in a hall dedicated to the ancestors and members, who work far from the village, return on these special days, which act also as family gatherings (Wai Lun 2011: 37-41).

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The Chinese case shows us that not only it is difficult to pinpoint a religious tradition through precise and exclusive affiliation, but if we are to follow other Christian-centric parameters, we encounter difficulties in individuate precise morphological contours, especially if we look for elements such as conversion, institutional organizations or the existence of an official priesthood or clergy. This is particularly true for that tradition that has always puzzled scholars and not only: 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. In the second controversy (1877-91), sparkled by the missionary-sinologist James Legge (1815-1897), consisted in debates whether "the cult of Confucius" or "Confucianism" (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 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

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[64] Type of morality book 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.

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 other five official religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam).

Setting apart for the moment (see more *infra* 4.3) the political/ideological factors in these debates, there are indeed some epistemological difficulties if one it to look 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 of conversions, it is difficult to speak of membership in Confucianism (cfr. 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 classic, 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 a community level, there are the private Confucian schools or academies – a setting especially fitting since Confucianism is a tradition for *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, along the whole imperial period - but also recently, as we have just seen - we find at the state level a complex ritual apparatus 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 notes (8), is that these settings we have just named are what we (modern Euro-Americans) would call 'secular', or at least we would not consider as a 'separated' or 'special' sphere of social behavior. This is highly relevant also in connection with our previous discussion on the twin birth of the religious and the secular (see above 1.7.2).

Indeed, a major source of puzzlement is the close relationship of Confucianism with statecraft, and not surprisingly various contemporary scholars engage Confucianism not as a religion, but as an ideology, a social and political ethos, a tradition of thought or philosophy (cfr. Sun 25-7). From Han (206 BC. al 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 (7th-11th 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 2016: 16-31).

Another relevant issue is the 'plasticity' of Confucianism. On one side, "Confucian conceptual framework was flexible enough that it was always possible to incorporate opponents' ideas and

practices" (Knapp 2012: 147).[65] On the other, it was co-opted by other traditions, especially by Chan Buddhists during the Song dynasty (960-1279), who incorporate in their training the then dominant form of Confucianism as formulated by Zhu Xi (1130-1200), along with other forms of Song elite culture and learning. It was in fact through the Chan/Zen mediation of the so-called Gozan temples network that Confucianism, in medieval Japan, started to be more broadly culturally integrated than it had been in ancient times, albeit not in a clearly systematized way. According to Paramore (2016: 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. Confucianism exerted also an influence in the conceptualization of Shintō as a separate tradition (more on this *infra* in this section and in 4.2.2).

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 *jao* means that Confucianism "must have been playing the same game" (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 Daoist adepts (*daoshi*)" (3). According to Sun, "Confucian rituals have been and will possibly remain the most salient component of this complex tradition" (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 into 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, cfr. also 77-96, 178-9). Shifting 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 Confucians, especially in contrast to Buddhism (Paramore 2016: 41-65).

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Continuing within the context of Japan, another exemplary case of the difficulties in individuating well-defined borders between religious traditions is the question of Buddhism vis-à-vis Shintō, and also the questions of different Buddhist schools vis-à-vis each other.

I shall 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

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[65] With this statement I do not intend that influences and borrowings did not occur from and to Daoism and Buddhism. On the contrary, especially during Ming (1368 -1644) and Qing dynasties exchanges between the three teachings were common, see e.g. Meulenbeld 2012: 135-8.

the 6th 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 (4.2.2). What is interesting now is to note how Buddhism and the *kami* worship developed an increasingly complex and intimate relationship which lasted till the 19th century (Teeuwen & Rambelli 2003). In the first century after the arrival of Buddhism in Japan (mid-6th century) Buddhist divinities were treated as foreign, and in a certain sense 'competitor' *kami*. Subsequent developments (commonly found also in other Asian Buddhist countries[66]), interpreted local *kami* as wrathful beings in need of the quelled by Buddhist doctrine, or as deities whose role was to protect and propagate Buddhist teachings. For these reasons, from the 7th century onwards, Buddhist temples were built near *kami* shrines and vice-versa, creating temple-shrine complexes (*jingūji*). Around the 11th to 12th centuries, *kami* began to be envisioned instead as local manifestations (Jp., *gongen*; Skt., *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 (538–597), who distinguished within this scripture a provisional and fundamental teaching. In Japan, instead, this idea came to indicate the original ground (*honji*), i.e. the Buddhist deities, from their traces (*suijaku*), i.e. 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 the fourth chapter of Daoist scripture *Daodejing*), i.e. they coarse their form as 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 briefly touch.

As argued by Abe (1999), when the Shingon school founder, Kūkai (774 - 835), brought to Japan esoteric[67] (Buddhist) teaching or *mikkyō*, he did so not with the intention of merely creating a separate lineage or school (*shū*), as the others already present in Japan. Instead, he sought to introduce a "new religious discourse" (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 (Skt. Mahāvairocana), as timelessly expounding

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[66] Space prevents further treatment, but even in what is commonly considered the most 'orthodox' tradition of Buddhism, i.e. Theravada Buddhism of south-east Asia, Buddhist monks cope and accommodate in various way local spirits, such as the *phī* in Thailand or the *nat* in Burma. Often the strategy has been to incorporate as low-rank superhuman beings within an overall Buddhist soteriological framework. Cfr. Crosby 132-4. See also *infra* 4.2.3 for what concerns the relation of the first Buddhist communities with local spirits.

[67] 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 see more in detail *infra* 4.2.3 and note 68.

his teaching not only through ordinary scriptures, but through the articulation and differentiation of any kind of linguistic or material phenomena (sinograph, sounds, ritual objects, natural elements, landscape, etc.) which were thus considered as meaningful signifiers (*ji*). The entire world is thus a text in a constant state of "semiogenic process" (282, cfr. 273-358) which requires however the right initiation (Jp. *kanjō*, Skt. *abhiṣeka*) and guidance to be read and actualized through the right ritual action. This kind of discourse proven successful and was adopted by other Buddhist schools. Tendai school even developed its own and very influential kind of esotericism (see Dolce 2011). This situation created what have been termed, by the influential Japanese scholar Kuroda, the *kenmitsu* (exoteric-esoteric) system of Buddhist thought (see Dobbins 1996) which was dominant in medieval Japan (12th -16th century). In a nutshell, all the various teachings, including not '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 included also 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 2003: 48).

As a brief example of Shintō-Buddhism combination, (cfr. Teewen 2003; Teeuwen & Rambelli 2003: 48-9), let us take the tutelary and ancestor *kami* of the imperial line, Amaterasu Ōmikami. She is worshipped in the Ise shrine, which is divided into Inner and Outer shrine. These two shrines are linked my means of two important 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* (Skt. *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*) and *Kongōchōkyō* (Skt. *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 the wisdom kings (Jp. *myōō*, Skt. *vidyārāja*),) Aizen and Fudō[68]. On the shintoist side, the number two

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[68] On Fudō see infra 4.2.2.

recalls Izanami and Izanagi, the two primordial *kami* who created Japan by stirring the ocean with an halberd. The place where the halberd struck corresponds to the central pillars of Ise shrine, underneath which white snakes are supposed to live. Snakes brings 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 made use also of other Chinese ideas, adding further layers of meanings. For example, the above cited dualisms were understood in terms of *yin-yang* correlative thinking and practices (Jp. *onmyōdō*),[69] and astronomical numerology links 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 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 original. They were mainly considered malevolent entities and identified with local, primitive and wrathful *kami* (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 in the Ise shrine (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 (see e.g. the introductory monograph on Japanese religions by Ellwood 2016, edited by Routledge). In Nara period, six schools were established: Kusha, Sanron, Jōjitsu, Kegon, Hossō, and Ritsu. Being just a preliminary, 'scholiastic' steps, these schools were then superseded by the two first 'indigenous' schools, Tendai and Shingon. Also these latter, due to their excessive intricacies of rituals and doctrines, which appealed the aesthetic taste of imperial 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 latter 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,

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[69] On *onmyōdō* in Japan, see Richey 2015.

see also Dobbins 1998). However, more recent research, drawing and developing from Kuroda's seminal theories,[70] greatly diverges from this narrative. First, until the begging of 16th century, the Buddhist landscape was still dominated by the so-called eight orthodox school (six of 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, see 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 *mileu* 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 (and still do) employing *darani*, formulae typical of esoteric Buddhism*,* but have also incorporated key *mikkyō* rituals such *goma* fire ritual[71] and the practices of esoteric initiations in the transmission of secret documents called *kirigami* (lit. "cut paper"). Most importantly, they shared all those esoteric rituals specialized in warning off evil influences and draws various type of blessing (Bodiford 2011).

Indeed, it was this strategy that helped medieval schools to slowly thrive through the medieval period, and became prominent after that 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 'denomination'. In order to be officially recognized, each temple had to be inserted in bureaucratic systems such as the *jidan seido* ("temple-household system") in which all citizens should register as parishioners to only one temple, and the *honmatsu seido* ("head-branch system"), in which each temple should be inserted in 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 recent past (Abe 1999: 409-13, cfr. Deal & Ruppert 2015: 171-209). These sectarian histories formed in turn the basis on which the first modern Japanese historians, from Meiji period (1868-1912) onwards, construed the history

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[70] Cfr. e.g. Kuroda 1996 and the other essays discussing its legacy in Dobbins 1996.
[71] From Skt. *homa*. It is a ritual virtually common to any esoteric/tantric religious traditions. See more infra in 4.2.3 and note 85.

of Japanese Buddhist through the lenses of Euro-American understanding of religion (Abe 1999: 414-6, cfr. Klautau 2011: 82-5 and *infra* 4.3.1).[72]

<center>***</center>

In this section we saw how 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 mutually exclusion not only in front of other religious traditions, but also among internal divisions. Discussion concerning the Chinese context showed how, even if traditions such as Buddhism, Daoism or Confucianism have their historical coherence and substantiality, they concur and often coalesce in common modalities of religious practice. Borders between traditions and other spheres of human action are fuzzy, as in the case of Confucianism 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. [73] The same peculiar hermeneutical framework that permitted Shintō-Buddhist coexistence, moreover, also allowed a closer networking among different Buddhist schools, at least until the early modernity.

In the modern euro-American perspective, one of the criteria through 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 examining this paradigm in relation to the East Asian context.

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[72] These Edo period developments may make us thinks that a 'denominational' paradigm may had been at work also outside modern Euro-American context. In a similar vein, we must also note that there are recent strands of scholarship which, by analyzing those pre-modern, emic conditions that lead to diverse secularities (See Kleine 2018 for the case of Japan) aims to curb oversimplified post-colonial narratives which place a 'western' religious-secular divide in opposition to a 'East' unable to think any kind of separation from religious phenomena. However, I do not think that this may affect my general argumentation. First, on a general level, the fact that I am contrasting clichéd, stereotyped- albeit diffused - way of conceptualizing religions with some examples of east Asian religiosity, is far from arguing that there exists a some kind of homogeneous 'modern Euro-American religiosity' antithetical to any kind of religious phenomena in Asia or elsewhere. On the contrary, I will argue that this contrast may fruitfully highlight unsuspected similarities (see *infra* 5th ch.). Concerning the issue at hand, i.e. Edo Buddhism sectarianization, while it is true that it may be similar to e.g. 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 inter-schools network had intrinsic factors (Shingon and Tendai esotericism). Furthermore, especially in early Edo period, inter-schools networks and mutual study was still taking place (cfr. Mohor 1994, Deal & Ruppert 2015: 197). Again, even if *honmatsu seido* fostered a focus on 'domestic' 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 belonging also to other schools, such as Tendai, Sōtō, Rinzai, even to those more 'sectarian', such as Jōdo shin or Hokke (Ambros & Williams 2001: 216-7). 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.

[73] For a discussion on the limits and possibility of the theoretical concept of syncretism, see Johnson 2016.

4.2.2 Inadequacy of the paradigm of religion as systems of beliefs

We have seen already seen in 1.7.1 how, from the Protestant Reformation to the Enlightenment, 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 (see 1.7.3) 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 inner dispositions, was understood as the place of the real authentic religiosity, to the detriment of external expressions such as ritual. Throughout in the 19th and early 20th centuries the scope of the discipline enlarged, but nonetheless the concept of belief remained 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 of the field have grown increasingly skeptical and critical on the centrality of the concept (see e.g. Vasquez 2011) and now beliefs are considered a part of a more complicated picture of lived religiosity, which involves a complex of both sensorial, intellectual, and emotional experiences of practitioners. For Bivis (2016: 503), beliefs, no longer the compass of the study of religion\s, 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 locations". 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, to be then *internalized* through both cognitive and emotional channels, to be externalized again 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, as key criteria in e.g. UK or USA, that the beliefs are "sincerely" or "genuinely" held (cfr. Agrama 2015: 304 and Sherwood 2015: 36). Not to mentions, of course, that in 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 belief" (McCloud 2017).

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If this stereotype shows its limitation even in contemporary American context (*ib.* 15-20), much more discrepancy is to be expected when it comes to extra-euro/American context. Indeed, Lopez (1998) has aptly argued how the preconceived idea of 'religion=beliefs', when tried to be imported and applied as it is in Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism, clashed at first with the native cultural *mileu*. This is the case of Henry Steel Colcott (1832-1907), co-founder of the Teosophical Society,[74] when he came to Sri Lanka as it was considered the land in which the original teaching of the historical Buddha has 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 is 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 it proven very difficult: the Sri Lankan monk that initially attested the 'orthodoxy' of this work later withdraw such certification. Furthermore, in order to prove the 'value' of his *Catechism*, and to gain also for the Teosophical Society's activities, Olcott had no choice but to perform healing practices through his knowledge of mesmerism, attributing such power, ironically, to this version of Buddha's teaching allegedly 'purified' by superstitions. Additionally, Olcott's disdain for the 'superstitious practices' that he considered later corruption of Buddhism's fundamental principles, drew the wrath of local Buddhist leaders, 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 basically thanks to the involvement of the dawning native bourgeois elite represented by Anagārika Dharmapāla (1864 –1933). However, this latter was most interested in presenting Buddhism as a scientific philosophy, instead of as a set of propositions of faith (cfr. Obeyesekera 1992: 6ff, see also *infra* 4.3.3).

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[74] See above ch. 1 note 13 and *infra* 4.3.2.

Shifting to 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 "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. To deal with this threat is one of the main duties of the ordained or religious specialist class, be them Buddhists, Daoists (even Confucian, cfr. Sutton 2004) or else. This fact makes us also notice that such ghosts can be treated within a variety of different metaphysical frameworks and with different ritual practices.

Furthermore, "spirit beliefs" may as well evolve and spread. 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 (see Bosco & Ho 1999). According to historical records, she was originally a female *wu* born in a costal era of Fujan region during the Song, 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 widely known in the coastal regions of China, in Taiwan and 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 (470 - 391 BCE) argued that their 'unbelief' is a cause of social ills, while Wang Chong (27 - 97) explicitly denied their existence through an argumentation whose rational and critical stances are quite appealing to modern standards (Bell 2002: 110-1, Nadeau 2012: 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" (111) and that such differences are acknowledged

without any particular problems, evidencing that positions on spirits are often matter of individual choice and deliberation, instead of adherence to certain text or any explicit indications.[75]

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Keeping on with the topic of elusive superhuman beings, the recent studies of Faure (2016a and 2016b) on Buddhist divinities in medieval Japan help further to 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" (Skt. *vidyārāja* Jp. *myōō*), *deva* from Vedic pantheon (Jp. *ten*), astral deities, earthly deities, "shining deities" *(myōjin)*, "temporary manifestation" (*gongen*), and *kami* (see chart in Faure 2016a: xii). However, as we have already seen above (4.2.1), Japanese *mikkyō* is based on a discourse whose logic is basically 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" (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 (i.e. meaning attributed to colors), thematic (e.g. the motif of the center), metonymical (i.e. snake linked to rain), numerological (i.e. seven stars of the Northern Dipper linked to other groups of seven items) and many other (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 other ones expresses their articulation, rather than their merging or confusion. These 'cross references' repeat themselves as 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. Furthermore, if, in the "explicit theology" of official religious texts this kind of associations maintain a kind of systematicity, especially in binary combination - which suits the Buddhist concept of nonduality and the *yin-yang* logic of

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[75] 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 premodern times it has done 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* (Earht). Nowadays it oversees in the form of the PRC, informed by its peculiar interpretation of Marxism. However, unable to impose its own orthodoxy and to monitor for 'violations of system of faith proposition', the empire system always sought convergence with established traditions, especially Buddhist and Daoist ones, exchanging patronage for legitimation. Concerning popular practices, as the above cited Mazu worship, the state most of the time 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, cfr. 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 on the five institutional religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism) and a harsher censorship on 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 see Yu 2005, Laliberté 2011, Clart 2012: 232-4. See also *infra* 4.3.1.

onmyōdō (2016b: 10) - there is also an "implicit theology" of ritual practice or literary works in which they are even less structural and freer. 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 (6). Let us briefly examine one example.

Fudō Myōō, despite his Indian origins as Acala, became in Japan a "thoroughly naturalized citizen" (2016a:118) and widespread as an important deity. According to one of the main texts of *mikkyō*, the *Dainichikyō* (Skt. *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*), he is a servant of the Buddhas, as his dark skin and slavish appearance would confirm. However, in subsequent commentaries he rises to the status of a tamer of those who oppose the *Dharma*, subjugating 'competitor deities' such as Daijizaiten (Maheśvara)[76] or other obstructing entities, such as personifications of passions hindering enlightenment (120-2, 129). This ability led to the development of other functions which helped his further dissemination. From protecting the Dharma, he also became a protector of the state in apotropaic rituals. Alternatively, he is the protector of the individual practitioner: since in esoteric Buddhism the practitioner has to discover his/her identity with the main Buddha Dainichi, Fudō becomes automatically the 'servant' of the practitioner. In the tradition of mountain ascetics (Shugendō), this protection occurs by means of a ritual merging between the practitioner and Fudō, which is in fact one of the major deities in this context (326). The motif of ritual merging relates with that of possession, and Fudō is indeed invoked also in case of exorcism (133-5). 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 astral deity of the Pole Star, Myōken, which, in turn, notwithstanding his initial lower rank (probably due to its Daoist origin) thanks to its commanding cosmic position he symbolically escapes the karmic transmigration that binds inferior deities and humans alike, eventually becoming the supreme judge of human destinies (see *ib*. 2nd ch.). Back to Fudō's name, "Unmovable" may refer also to the mind, in the sense of being unfettered by passion: this brings Fudō to be linked to various key concepts of Buddhism, such as the ninth consciousness, *amarashiki*, (Skt. *amala-vijñāna* "unsullied consciousness") - termed also as fudō*shiki* "*unmovable* consciousness" (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

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[76] 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 *mileu*.

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 are awakening") (147). Adding his iconography to the equation, since he is placed over a (unmovable) rock, he is revered as an earth-quelling deity (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 (126, 149ff; 2016b: 191), but also of the fierce deity, or class of deities, "elusive yet omnipresent" (2016a: 116) named Kōjin.

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Continuing with the case of Japan, if we have just seen how ideas concerning Buddhist deities were 'systematically unsystematical', any attempt to find a supposed 'immutable essence', especially in theological terms, fails even more blatantly when we consider the historical development of Shintō.[77] 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 fitted instead 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 (4.2.1) how the *kami* worship, early in the 7th century, 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 Yayoi (500 BCE - 300CE) and

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[77] As anticipated above (4.2.1), 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 17th century. One of the monographs I draw from for my brief account of Shintō (Breen and 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". (44, see also Mizue 2003: 13). She affirms this also in light of 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 issue 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 (es. Jp. *dō* of "way" or *kyō* of "teaching").

Kofun (300 - 600) periods reveals elements of continental religiosity such as *yin-yang* thinking, ideas of immortality, divination using animal bones, burial practices and cosmological animal imagery (cfr. Deal 2017: 191-7 Hardacre 2017: 17-45). In the 5th century, Korean emigrants fleeing from wars brought in Japan, among other things, literacy, Buddhist ideas and Confucian statecraft, which fed eventually into the first 'constitutional document' of Japan. Due to 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 6th century. This was the context of the first attempt to systematize *kami* worship, carried through the institution of a governmental apparatus, the Jingikan ("council of heaven and earth deities"), which was overseeing a 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 time had a relatively simple character, responding with blessing upon offerings, and with curse (*tatari*) upon breaching of taboos. Laws regulating these activities heavily draw from Chinese models such as the *Book of Rites* (31). Rituals, especially those aimed at protecting from, or soothing vengeful *kami*, employed a *yin-yang* framework (Breen & Teeuwen 2010: 36-8). Nonetheless, Hardacre argues, "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" (45).

However, the Jinjikan's control over *kami* matters roughly spanned only from 8th to 10th century. Instead, from 10th to the 13th 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 in order 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 unethical conducts (125-8). Buddhist priests brought to Japan other deities from India, Korea, and China. Some of them were quickly "naturalized" and became very popular. Notable examples, still worshipped today, are Benzaiten, Shinra (Kr. Silla) Myōjin and Daikokuten (Skt. Mahākaka). (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 (see above 4.2.1). *Kami* thus progressively transformed into

agents of salvation, a process that reached its peak during 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 form of moral lessons instead of abstract Buddhist doctrines, following the logic of "dimming the light" (*wakō*) of Buddhist teachings (cfr. Hardacre 2017: 197-202).

However, further developments in theological thought concerning *kami* were carried over, notably by Watarai priest of the Outer Shrine of Ise, who put at the same level 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. In this way, though still firm in the *kenmitsu* framework, the *honji-suijaku* hierarchy of Buddha over *kami* started to be questioned (169-72). The complete reversal of the *honji-suijaku* paradigm was accomplished by Yoshida Kanetomo (1435-1511), who is credited for 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. 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 17th century, the Tokugawa shogunate gave to Yoshida family the supervision of all *kami* affairs.

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 (1618–82), 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 Shinto, in particular, preached loyalty to the emperor lineage (Hardacre 2017: 245-62). On a more popular level, certain *kami* and shrines became object of privileged practices. 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 Edo period, however, 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* (ca. 710). By 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 (1776-1843), under also the influence of Christian ideas, developed Shintō theories of the soul, the afterlife, and the cosmogony. 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 conceived to become *kami* themselves, thus ancestor worship could not be done in Buddhist terms (Breen & Teuween 2010: 60-5). These influential ideas coalesced, near the end of Edo period, in a grass-root religious movement, called Fukkō Shintō, ("Shintō Restoration") whose practices and doctrines "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, due to its strong focus on the special status of Japan as land of the gods and on the role of the emperor, became swiftly co-opted by the newly established imperial government right after the Meiji Restoration (1868). 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 to 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 modern euro-American concept of "religion" was circulating (see more on this *infra* 4.3.1), and when asked to formulate concise doctrines of Shintō in these terms, *kami* specialists reached no agreement. Buddhists took chance to campaign 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 1880s. This allowed the government to combine freedom of religion, asked 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,[78] which were to be followed irrespectively of one's religious - in modern term - belonging. However, it must also be noted that other traditions which were focused on particular *kami*, sacred places, practices or worships were legally identified as sectarian (*kyōha*) Shintō and distinguished by 'non religious' shrine Shintō, while Japanese academicians were not all convinced of the non-religiosity of Shintō (Hardacre 2017: 410-2). Indeed, it is possible to discern a certain 'theology' embodied in Shintō shrine practices. Especially during the years of 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 Japan's superiority, its mission to rule Asia (if not the whole world), and the idea of the family-state connected through common lines of ancestors-patriots (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 Shrine 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, today still no theologically clear position can be found. Actors outside the Jinja Honchō too play active roles in re-describing Shintō character, also for touristic purposes. Furthermore, prominent shrines or shrine networks, such as Inari's one, are presently outside the association. One of the latest Shintō's self-representation, widely disseminated also beyond Japan, is what Rots calls 'Shinto environmentalist paradigm' (Rots 2015), which stresses Shintō as basically animistic, worshipping the force of nature and preaching a harmonious coexistence between men and environment. Key symbols and ideas are the woodland which usually surround the shrines (*chinjū no mori*, lit. "protective forest"), and their preservation for ecological as well as cultural heritage- related reasons.

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Having concluded our brief sketch of Shintō's history without finding any stable system of beliefs, we shift now to a different context, and engage a broader topic, i.e. the religious landscape of India. Also in this case we may observe how the epistemological stereotype of "system of belief" is actually

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[78] 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).

useless in front of one of the most conspicuous, modern discursive constructs in the field of religion (on this point see more *infra* 4.3.1), i.e. Hinduism, without even resorting to specific examples.

In fact, 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 (2017:16-9) 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 traditions 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 discussing some "largely shared assumption" about human and divine conditions, largely based, but not limited, to the *Upaniṣad* (cfr.43-88).

Indeed, scholars often identify a cluster of main traits of Hinduism. Flood (2003a: 2) indicates "shared ritual patterns, a shared revelation, a belief in reincarnation (*saṃsār*a), liberation (*mokṣa*), and a particular form of endogamous social organization or caste". Knott (2016: 114) indicates "the caste system, the authority of the *Veda*, the concept of *dharma*, and Aryan identity", along with "the popular narrative traditions of the Ramayana, 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" (*ib.*). 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 non 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. Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava traditions, disputed quite different metaphysical positions, such as monistic or dualistic ones (Flood 2003a: 5-6, see also Flood 2003b, Colas 2003 and 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 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 Mughal dynasty, who singled out the belief of reincarnation as the defining belief of Hinduism, 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" (44), a kind of open-mindedness supported also by the "tendency of Hindus to be more orthoprax than orthodox" (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" (*ib.*).

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In the previous section I pointed out how it makes little sense, in many East-Asian contexts, to ask which religion one belongs to, and expect a clear-cut affiliation and a strict maintenance of purity and alterity between religious traditions. With the cursory glances of this section on certain general as well as particular aspects of East-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.

4.2.3 Inadequacy of the paradigm of the primacy of inner and 'disenchanted' dimensions in religions

We have seen in the 1st chapter (1.7) 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, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (and to some extent are not completely waned), both academic and folk conceptions of what is – and ought – to be a religion. 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), 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 that others, and this applies also – or especially – 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, by adopting historical criticism and a more humanistic view of Jesus Christ (cfr. Woodhead 2005: 193-7; Lupi 2015: 92ff, 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 particular (cfr. *ib.* 45-8, 70-2), Smith, with his *Lectures on the Religion of Semites* (1889), sought to show that the 'primitive' aspects of ancient Hebrew religion, recognizable within the Bible and in some practices still present among nomadic Arabic tribes, have been able to evolve

into "'higher', 'healthier', 'modern' form of spiritual religion'" (60). We have already seen (1.7.1) how such discursive *mileu also* elicited the transformation of Buddhism from "heathenism" to "world religion", insofar 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 be found 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*, whose will can only be fathomed by carrying out a rigorous ethical life.

Given (among other factors) this narrative of disenchantment[79], it does not come as surprise the epistemological emphasis on religion as primarily based on the notion of experience. As Sharf (2000: 268-71) noted, 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 (i.e. sociological) and - most importantly - common to all the other religions. This last point also appeals the religionist as s/he may argue how all religions may stem from a common human experience, thus justifying on a 'natural' base her/his affiliation. At the same time, this discourse about a common ground of experience allows to argue that one's own tradition is what express more truthfully this very 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

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[79] 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, Newton, to Freud, even to Vienna neopositivists) actually entertained more nuanced relationships with magical and esoteric thought.

is considered basically a matter of feeling, understandable only undergoing the same kind of experience. Rudolph Otto (see above 1.3) argues for the superiority of Christianity since it is the tradition where the experience of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* is brought about in the most complete way, through the mystery of God and the need for atonement. We will see (*infra* 4.3.4) 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.

I 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 key-words of this model, such as "experience", "psychologization", "de-ritualization", "de-somatization", "transcendent", "individual", "rationalization" and so on.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

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 both recent cultural-historical reasons (see *infra* 4.3.1), but relates also 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 in institutional with an established lineage (and inner competing schools) during the Song, when it established, as the statement representative of its foundational approach, the famous phrase attributed to the mythical patriarch Bodhidarma: "a separate transmission apart from the teachings, not relying on scriptures, pointing directly at the human mind, seeing the nature and attaining Buddhahood"[80]. To this it was also added the idea of "transmission of the mind (of the historical Buddha) through the mind".[81] Such rhetorical devices not only served to give a peculiar identity to the Chan tradition, but differentiated it and put it in competition with Tiendai tradition who clearly identified itself as the "teachings lineage" (*jaozong*) based mainly on scriptures (cfr. Foulk 2007, Copp 2012 and 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, as in the case of the influent master Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163) and his method of *kanhua* (Jpn. *kanna*), i.e. "viewing the (key) phrase" (of a *gong'an*, Jpn. *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

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[80] Cn. *Jiaowai bieyun, bu li wenzi, zhi zhi renxin, jian xing cheng fo*, Jp. *kyōge betsuden, furyū monji, jikishi ninshin, kenshō jōbutsu*.

[81] Cn. *Yi xin chuan xin*, Jp. *Ishin denshin*.

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 Song and Yuan (1279-1368) period, *gong'an* practice not only required a thoroughly 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 concerning the Buddha nature in insentient beings (see 210-29). Even if Dahui's *kanhua* ultimately became the mainstream practice in late imperial China and spread widely also 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 (286).[82]

Furthermore, as the name explains ("public cases") *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 (*qinggui,* Jp. *shingi,* "rules of purity"), the master-disciple sessions, which often involved *gong'an*, were structured in a such detailed protocol (prostration, incense offerings) that can be interpreted as "a ritual re-enactment of the encounters between Chan masters and disciples that were contained in the flame histories[83]" (Foulk 1993: 181). A similar analysis can made for another central Chan/Zen practice, the ritual of "ascending the (Dharma) hall" (Cn. *shangtang,* Jp. *jōdō*), in which the abbot of the monastery, in formal occasions, delivers a public sermon on Chan doctrine while seating on a high chair in the Dharma hall (see 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 to the Chan/Zen abbot to master "a considerable body of canonical literature and internalize the complex rhetorical logic of Buddhist dialectic" (266) 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, i.e. the sudden enlightenment of the practitioners or the eccentric behavior of the masters, are actually results of careful study and ritualized performance. Finally, one should not oversee all those ritual elements present in both the "rules of purity" and the training

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[82] For a recent, multi-layered interpretation of *kōan* that eschew mystical or a-rational explanation, see Heine 2014, esp. 70-97.

[83] "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)" (Chuandnglu , Jp. *dentōroku*), in which many *gong'an/kōan* can be found.

curriculum that have been integral part of Chan/Zen monasteries up to contemporary times. In e.g. Japanese Zen, every-day life within a monastery, including aspects such as eating, cleaning and bathing, is thoroughly formalized, involving also invocation to various buddhas and bodhisattvas. Monastic life is marked by numerous daily or periodic rituals involving *sūtra* chanting, offerings to both deities and ghosts, karmic merit transfers, annual observances such as new years' rites and so on, plus the ritual services (esp. memorial and funerals) provided to laity (see Foulk 2008: 40-82).

<center>***</center>

Relying to an inward, de-ritualized and de-somatized model of religiosity runs seriously 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,[84] scholars have sorted out working definitions or at least a series of persisting traits of Indic origins.[85] Among these traits relevant for our discussion, we may start from a very common metaphysical conception of the universe. This latter 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 of 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 microcosmic equivalent of this very essence-manifestation continuum. The key point here is that human beings, as such, have the potential to "ritually appropriate and channel" this principle, in "creative and emancipatory ways" (White D. 2000: 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 D. 2000: 10ff, Flood 2006:11ff), the physical body is not the impediment but the privileged 'tool' for religious goals. As the microcosmic manifestation of the supreme principle, the body is thought to be host of various kinds of 'energies' (such as *kuṇḍalinī* or "she who is coiled", *prāṇa* or

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[84] 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, 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 (cfr. White D. 2000: 4-5; Flood 2006: 9). Moreover, the closely related category of "esoteric Buddhism" further stirs up the debate with the issue of whether or not it should be conceptually separated from "tantrism" (Orzech, Payne, Sørensen 2011). 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 D. 2000: 7; Orzech, Payne, Sørensen 2011: 3).

[85] 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 explains also why many formulae have been preserved in Sanskrit language throughout east Asia (Cfr. Payne 2011).

"breath", *prajñā* or "wisdom") and 'energetic 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* i.e. "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 his present body" (*sokushin jōbutsu* see e.g. Raveri 2014: 186-92, 205-9). The ritual devices through which engendering 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 Buddhist context, these three devices correspond 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 unite back these two principles, a process which is very often conceived, represented and also enacted in terms of sexual union. This interpretation reinforces further 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) (cfr. White 2000: 13-18). However, actual examples greatly vary in terms of performance and meanings of the sexual tropes, accordingly to historical and social circumstances. For example, in Kashmiri tantrism we find a ritual which, in the 7th century CE, involved the offering and consumption of sexual fluids to appease and control divine powers. By the 10th 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, certain documents of medieval Japan report 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 (Iyanaga 2011). However, other sexual tropes were well-ingrained in the religious and cultural *mileu* of medieval Japan, 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 (Klein 1997 and Faure 2000) the contents of famous poetic and mythical-historical works such as the *Ise*

monogatari (late 9ᵗʰ 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. The commentaries employ in fact a tantric Buddhist embryological theory, which contends that the process of embryonic grown is tantamount to the process of enlightenment (see Dolce 2015). Through the trope of sexual union, these commentaries conflate the theme of macrocosmic emanation with the one of microcosmic soteriology. Accordingly, erotic desire, as expressed i.e. in the love poems of the *Ise monogatari*, is understood as the driving force (instead of a hindrance) towards enlightenment (Klein 1997: 450ff).

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Speaking of the role of the body in religious theory and practice of East-Asia, one cannot avoid touching briefly the tradition of Daoism. 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.) (cfr. 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 (cfr. Penny 2000). Therefore, physicality and aliveness can be seen as fundamental concerns throughout the entire history of Daoism and beyon (Komjathy 2013: 190). Chinese life-prolonging (*yangsheng*) techniques, including breathing exercises, sexual hygiene, therapeutic gymnastic, massages, dietetics and drugs ingestion have a long history as pan-Chinese medical tradition since 5ᵗʰ century BCE. While they developed in a distinct medical tradition, since the first formation of organized Daoism in 2ⁿᵈ century CE, these practices have always been integrated, discussed and refined in almost every Daoist schools, 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-micro cosmos 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 around 2ⁿᵈ, 3ʳᵈ 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 (see Pregadio 2006, 2008: 75-85).

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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. to be centered on "transcendence" (see e.g. Smith L. 2017) or on what Tillich would term as "ultimate concerns" (cfr. above 1.5 and Lorusso 2017: 136ff). Instead, reconnecting with our discussion of tantrism, White warns us that

> 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. (2000: 30)

Indeed, it has been argued that one of the reasons behind the spread of tantric Buddhism (e.g. Davidson 2002) and *tantra* in general can be found in its being a kind of instrumental *techne*, especially in service to rulers. As a matter of fact, tantric promises of manipulation of cosmic energies through ritual, or the political potential of images of the cosmos hierarchically yet organically centered on a single principle as represented e.g. by the *maṇḍala,* did appeal lords, king and emperors. Accordingly, they would ascent, through specific initiation,[86] to the status of a "sorcerer sovereign" (Skt. *vidyādhararajā*) endowed with superhuman powers (Skt. *siddhi*, lit. "perfection"). 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 (cfr. above 4.2.1) enables the ascetic practitioners to gain superhuman powers (*genjustu*) and therefore to meet the request of the patronizing local communities in terms of "worldly benefits" (Jp. *genze riyaku*) such as adverting misfortune, exorcism, solicit good fortune, divination and so on (see e.g. Miyake H. 1989 and *infra* in this section).

As we will see (4.3), such 'magical-superstitious' traits of Hinduism and Buddhism was 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 (cfr. also above 1.7.1). However, as De Caroli (2004) has shown, this reading of the first Buddhism as inherently disenchanted, 'psychological' and 'rational', clearly overlooked textual and archeological

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[86] 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: *ad vocem abhiṣeka*).

evidence. [87] 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 spirits-deity or *genii loci*, notably those termed *yakkah* (Skt. *yakṣa*). In the texts, Buddha and monks do not forbid to make 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 be read also as a Buddhist appropriation of pre-existing rituals. These, in fact, as 7th 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 spirit of the community or monastery. Such power held by monks, furthermore, helps greatly in gaining support from local lay communities.

Some readers may object that to the above discussed examples refer 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 (see *infra* 4.3.). However, more often than not, these discourses and practices involve actors coming from religious or intellectual elites, possibly speaking with apologetic aim, and focus 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[88] (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 revolve exclusively 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

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[87] Such as statues and notably the widely disseminated narratives of Buddha's previous life known as *jātaka*.

[88] Indeed, if we recall the appearances of Buddhism in the RE models analyzed in the previous chapter, the great majority referred to Theravada Buddhism's topics. This equation of Theravāda Buddhism with early Buddhism is due to various factors: the preservation of a Canon in *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), 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 changes, notably those engendered by the encounters with westerners, and even the adoption of the term *theravāda* as representative of the Buddhism in Sri Lanka and of South East Asia is a modern development (Crosby 2013: 1-4).

individual. Walters (2003) has in fact labeled as "sociokarma" those 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' that 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 recitation of *pāli* texts (mostly incomprehensible to laity and even to some monks), by observing filial piety and so on. The most common modality, however, remains the worship and 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 persons, so to ease their rebirth and avoid their coming back as ghosts (see Crosby 2013: 118-22). Apart from *kamma*-related practices, "at the heart of many Theravāda rituals is the chanting of *paritta*" (125). These latter are texts mainly extracted from the Pāli Canon and they are regarded as having great powers such as, for example, being able to convert any kinds of malevolent spirits from any regions (because they are in *pāli*, considered a *lingua franca*). The reason is that they are Buddha's words and thus are the most efficacious (in karmic sense) examples of "right speech". *Paritta* 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 (125-28). 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.

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In our discussion on the limits of an idea of religiosity based on individual inner world, disenchanted and focused on transcendent goals, one last case we cannot avoid examining is contemporary Japan. As a matter of fact, different scholars have argued that it is possible to sort out, across the bewildering number and mutual entanglements of Japanese religious traditions, certain common patterns, so that we may speak of a "common religion" (Reader & Tanabe 1999) or "primal religion" (Pye 1996) of Japan. The point here is that the characteristic trait of these patterns is to being centered in the dimension of practice.[89] Furthermore, such practice-oriented religiosity has a strong focus on the material, communal and pragmatic aspects of everyday life.

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[89] It has been suggested that focusing on practice as the privileged object of enquiry (instead e.g. on doctrinal texts) could be the most fruitful approach to understand Japanese religiosity, as it would allow to explore religion as a process

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*, i.e. "humbly visit" to a special place, irrespectively of being a Buddhist temple, a Shintō shrine, a mausoleum or even a particular natural spot whose special nature is duly signaled (e.g. by a *torii*). The second field is time, linked to the key word of *nenjūgyōji*, i.e. the "annual events". Any kind of religious organizations, 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" (49), with the New Year as the constant common denomination. The third field of practice are socially integrative events, and the key word is *matsuri*, a religious festival consisting of various public events of ritual and merrymaking nature. It is usually considered the foremost expression of Shintō religiosity, in which local *kami* is believed to take part, in order to renew the mutual interdependence between him and the participating community. However, it is often endowed with further layers of meanings, from valorizations of local culture (also 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 (cfr. Bulian 2018: 27-9). *Matsuri* is therefore not an exclusive term to Shintō but pertains also to Buddhist *nenjūgyōji* with e.g. 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 life of the individual within society, whose critical or pivotal moments - not only most 'conspicuous' ones, such as births, 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 do continue after the funeral to ensure that the recently deceased one reaches, without troubles, the status of ancestor (cfr. e.g. 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" (48, 50-1), whose basic structure is an exchange between practitioners and a counterpart (a temple, a god, an ancestor) to receive benefit in this life. In fact, the key word here is *genze riyaku* ("wordly benefits") and, according to Tanabe and Reader (1999: 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[90] of everyday life and can be divided fundamentally in *kaiun* (opening good

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of interaction between various ritual, narrative, institutional, political, textual and discursive components (Dolce 2015b: 48ff).

[90] Traffic safety, recovery from illness, making a good marriage, safe childbirth, business prosperity, successful career, prevention of theft, success in study, and many others (see Reader & Tanabe 1999: 45-9).

luck) and *yakuyuk*e (prevention 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 divination slips and tying them on a three branch (*omijuki*), or praying a deity, usually enshrined in site specialized in certain 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 e.g. conducting kitō (prayer) rituals 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,[91] and figures notably in prominent *sūtra* such as the *Lotus Sūtra of wonderful law* (Skt. *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra*, Jp. *Myōhōrengekyō*), the *Garland Sūtra* (Skt. *Avataṃsakasūtra*, Jp. *Kegonkyō*) the *Sūtra of the Golden Light* (Skt *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* (Skt. *upāyakauśalya*) "skillful mean". That is, a 'trick' to draw practitioners towards otherworldly salvation through initial material benefits. However, Tanabe and Reader 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" (100, cfr. 71-102). On the other hand, it would be misleading to address such kind of religiosity as 'frivolous'. On the contrary, the logic of practical pursuit implies strong personal commitment in the terms of a logic of exchange between petitioner and deity (cfr. 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) this 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 is accompanied by a card indicating, among the ways for accumulating wealth, 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 *genze riyaku* practices paradoxically aligns with motivations and basic values expressed in secular societies: happiness, assurances about the future, success and solace in exchange to hard work, duty and diligence (Reader & Tanabe 1999: 256-8). Since the quest for practical benefits is furthermore considered to be conductive to the strengthening of *shinkō*, i.e. (affective) faith in

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[91] As a matter of fact, we read in the *Nihonshoki* ("Cronicle of Japan") that when Buddhism was officially introduced in Japan through Korean embassies in the 6th century, it was its potential for pragmatic benefits that was highlighted (cfr. Deal & Ruppert 2015: 13).

deities' power, to psychological benefit such as *anshin* ("peace of mind") and to a general idea of *kyūsai* ("salvation") (17-20), such religiosity, far for being 'shallow', may be considered pivotal when it comes to take "life shaping decisions" (Pye 2008: *passim*).

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In this section I offered a rather arbitrary account of various 'enchanted' modes of East 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 progressive preference, in Euro-American context, 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 in contrastive terms with religion: "spirituality".

4.2.4 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 United States this word is used in increasingly contrastive terms to religion, as more than quarter of Americans describe themselves as spiritual but not religious (Lipka & Gecewicz 2017). As we have seen in chapter 3, "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" (see above 1.7.1), also "spirituality" has its own genealogical development, that can be sketched in this way[92]: 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 human life principle received (and returned) from him. 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 introduced also the ontological distinction between spirituality and materiality (Gr. *hyle*, Lt. *materialitas*). In medieval times, the

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[92] Cfr. Principe 1983, Carrette and King 2005: 30-47, Boas 2014: 48-9.

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 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 by the influence of authors such as Schleiermacher's and his emphasis on religious feeling, in the late 19th and early 20th 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" (Boas 2014: 49). In summary, at least till the early 20th 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 (1.7.1 and 1.7.2).

However, as Heelas explains (2008: 25-46), Romanticism put the seeds of what spirituality came to be understood in contemporary times. He identifies such seeds in the following romantic themes: first, an underlying neoplatonic paradigm of a primordial 'Absolute Unity' which disintegrated in multiplicity. This caused sufferings 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 such 'Absolute'. This latter is often conceptualized, instead of a distant God, as a vital force residing in immanent frame, often in the form of divinized 'Nature', and active behind the formation of one's own very self. In fact, one of the best paths to reach such 'Absolute' (the other being philosophy) is the individual, subjective, artistic expression, in which in fact the romantic 'Genius' should appear. This principle that flows in various different 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 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 *ib.*:38). Romantic themes influenced the spheres of health, agriculture and education. Macrobiotics and holistic practice aimed at well-being began to develop. In education, it developed the idea of the positiveness of letting the inherent natural attitudes of children flow free. This led to the child-centered or self-centered educative philosophy later expounded by Steiner (1861-1925) or Montessori. In summary, by the 1910s, it was well attested the general motif of a contrastive duality between, on one side, the sacrality attributed to the depths of inner life, and on the other, the 'profane' external world filled with malfunctioning social, cultural and old-traditions-bounded arrangements (45).

In the second half of 20ᵗʰ century, the above 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 indicated with the umbrella term of New Age (cfr. Chryssides 2007; Sutcliffe & Gilhus 2014: 1-6), whose participants often defined themselves as "spirituals" (Boas 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 hallucinogens and certain kinds of music. From the 70s onwards the duality of subjective experience *versus* the constrains of society faded, and the quest for an "higher self" began to be more 'psychologized' and more 'mainstream-affirming'. For example, the obstacles for spiritual growth are no more found in society, but within one own's mind. 'Mainstream-affirming' tendencies intensified in the 80s and early 90s, when wealth accumulation and career development came even to be seen as manifestations of a thriving inner spirituality (Heelas 2008: 51-2). Present day spirituality, argues Heelas, can be briefly described as "wellbeing 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 human and natural environment, which all 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 reflect 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 (in sense of hidden, invisible, subtle) dimension behind materiality. However, there is a difference from the most common forms of esotericism, in which the authentication of having reached the 'Truth' is bestowed by external authority, e.g. a master. By contrast, in contemporary spirituality the authority sanctioning that 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 set 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 (cfr. 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 *mileu* of contemporary capitalism (Altglas 2014: 271-9; Boas 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 on one's own spiritual praxis. Carrette and King (2005: 123-68) contend that, giving the extreme ambivalence of the meaning of spirituality, it has been easily taken over by corporate ethics and management techniques, resulting in discourses that 'spiritualize' (i.e. give additional, emotional layers of meaning) the corporate ideology of profit, or in the invention 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, Boas (2014: 52) argues against the use of "spirituality" as an etic term, where instead it should be understood as an emic notion (cfr. above 1.8), 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

> …'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. (79)

How this discussion on spirituality is relevant to our treatment of East Asian religions in education? The 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 enough exotic to became fashionable and commodifiable. In order to understand how this happened and what is its significance when discussing East Asian religions and education, we need to address the impact of modernity and coloniality on East Asian religious tradition, an impact that engendered a series of pivotal and stratified processes of Orientalism, Self-Orientalism and Occidentalism.

4.3 The historical legacy of modernity and colonialism: Orientalism, Self-Orientalism and Occidentalism

We have seen above (1.7) 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. These inputs stimulated a series of self-reflection on the identity of Christianity in front of various instances of diversity: diversity within Christianity, the 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", 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 aspect as their constitutive norms, and denying any historical evolution of said aspects. This, argued Said, justified colonial and imperial exploitation.

However, Said's thesis has been subject to various reflection 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" (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 by the very idea that there it exist 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 (cfr. 57ff).

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 and inflating distinctive 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 ri-elaborated by the people who were the object of said 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 representations 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 to 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 fantasised and desired (exoticistic Orientalism)" (98).

On the background of these theoretical reflections, 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 inferior, in need to ger rid of their superstitions *tout court* or at least in need to wipe off these superstitious from the 'authentic' core of their religions (see *infra* 4.3.1). This latter case is a clear instance of what has been called the "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm 1983). Indeed, Asian people's "responses to novel situations" (2) such as colonialism or threat of colonial rule, has often took the form of fictious, 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. This happened out of three needs. First, to contribute to the production of an identarian base for the formation of a modern nation, understood as "imagined community" (Anderson 1983). Secondly, to internally foster a certain articulation of native religious traditions in order to make them 'fit' for the modern re-configuration of these imagined community. Thirdly, to contribute to the promotion,

in front of Euro-American powers, of these imagined communities, previously also despised - if not especially - on religious grounds.

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 critiques to Christianity, critique to scientific rationality, 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 (see *infra* 4.3.2). Asian actors, consciously or not, took with due consideration these Euro-American imagery and interpretations, and produced accordingly their self-orientalist representations and elaborations both of the concept of 'Religion' as a universal, and of their own religious traditions.

These exchanges engendered a series of mutually confirming representations that nonetheless varies through history, following changes in contexts and relative tactical and hermeneutical operations (see *infra* 4.3.3). 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. All these representations must be taken into serious consideration when dealing with the issue of teaching East Asian religious traditions.

4.3.1 The introduction of the concept of "religion" in East Asian contexts

Above (4.2.2) I have referred to Hinduism as one most conspicuous modern discursive construct in the field of religion. However, it would be highly reductive to state that it was complete invention of the colonizers subsequently imposed upon a passive colonized population. As I have hinted above (1.7.3), the Indian sub-continent offers a case for examining 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 of verses of the poet Kabir (15th cen.), who distinguished 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 on natives' religion and being able 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 as interlocutors what better fitted their ideas of standard religion. Therefore, they addressed the brahmans (and to a lesser extent, Muslim law-doctors), i.e. the persons who mostly resembled a specialized, priestly class devoted to the exegesis of ancient sacred texts. Out of these choices it 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 expenses of other texts such as the *Purāṇa* or other religious expressions such as rituals, art or dance. This sanification applied notably to Tantrism. Renowned sanskritist Monier-Williams, 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 it as a tradition characterized basically by orgies with wine and women, where sanguinary sacrifices are enacted and meaningless formulae are uttered with the aim to acquire magical power and destroy one's enemies, for Monier-Williams Tantrism was 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 was 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 aimed especially 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 pernicious departure from authentic Hindu tradition and endorsed only a highly purified version of Tantric doctrines or practices. These latter expounded an impersonal image of the Absolute, an image of Kali as a loving mother and mentioned sexual practices as permitted only with one's own wife (cfr. Urban 2003: 80-3).

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 another 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 19th century, a term like '*dharma*' had come to have almost the same meaning as 'religion' or 'religious creed'. As 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 adherent to subscribe to Ten principles (Oddie 2010: 46-7).

These reformist attempts engendered also opposite reactions, such as those published in Calcutta's 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*).

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Shifting our discussion toward the Chinese case, the historical context in which discourses of religion in modern terms began to increasingly develop was that of the Qing empire at turn of the century. The government was in a crumbling state, bankrupt, militarily humiliated by external forces, i.e. the Western powers through the two Opium wars and Japan through the war over Korea. From

the second half of 19th 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 mean to survive, it would be useless without a more profound ideological reform (cfr. Cheng 2000: 656-60), also including the newly imported concept of religion.

We have already seen (4.2.1) 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 native 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, and an even wider range of all the various worships, practices and doctrines at local level, especially those closely adhering to a patriarchal order of society (territorial communities, lineages, guilds), and those that were not deemed threatening to imperial authority and social cohesion by local governors (cfr. Gossaer 2005: 3). This traditional conception of 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 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). He proposed the creation of a network of state-managed 'Confucian churches' in which all Chinese should be compelled to attend weekly Confucian masses in which Confucian classics would be read by a Confucian pastor. This, in his plans, was meant to rectify the lax morality of a population that for two millennia has built temples to all sorts of immoral deities, causing 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 adaptation of Japanese neologisms, *shūkyō* and *meishin*, invented few years earlier (see *infra* shortly). However, recent research (Barret & Tarocco 2012) shed light to 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" (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" (*ib.*). This Zongmi's usage, still as *ad hoc* unions and not as regular words, seems to have passed down until the 19th century, e.g. 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" (314). Such connection of *zong*, *jiao* and matters related to Buddhist clergy appears then in the 1838 writings of missionary Karl Gützlaff (1803 - 1851), who 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 (315). In this sense, *zong* and *jiao* came to be closely associated with "beliefs and practices of the relatively few religious professionals" (Tarocco 2008:45).

Indeed, it is not a case 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 that it was Buddhism, for it showed traits more akin to 'rational belief' (*zhe xin*) than 'superstition' (*mixin*) (cfr. 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 slogan such as "Destroy temples to build schools" (*huimiao banxue*), because the religious discourse and the educational one, in terms of both moral and knowledge improvement, were entangled (49-50).

Eventually, the modernist rhetoric overwhelmed even those who wanted a highly reformed tradition as 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 matter of religion with the authority of the 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 in 1912 the traditional lunar-solar calendar, Republicans tried to replace (or at least 'rationalize') all those recurrences, especially deities' birthday, characterized by "unproductive", "hot and noisy" sociality (cfr Nedostup 2008: *passim*), 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, i.e. freedom was permitted only to those traditions that fitted 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 over by relatively independent specialists in service to local temples, mosques and schools. Confucianism, due to its strong relation with imperial past did not managed be recognized. Eventually, five official religions were established, Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism and (later) Daoism (79-89). They shared common traits such as "bureaucratic control of religion, assimilation of political ideology into the religious discourse, antiritual rhetoric, and attempts at 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 the challenge of modernity, such as the so-called redemptive societies, which proposed new communal forms of universal salvation, or such as those movements who tried to modernize the various body cultivation and healing traditions involving meditation, martial arts, and traditional medicine (91, see 91-121).

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Similar to China, the pressure of Euro-American powers in East Asian left a clear impression to the Japanese who, already near the end of Edo period, strongly felt the urgency to take into serious consideration both the technical and cultural resources of the Euro-Americans, [93] and to implement strong reforms accordingly to avoid the same fate as China (cfr. Kitaoka 2017:11-24). The issue of unequal treaties also signaled the need of being recognized among 'civilized people', and, consequently, of adopting certain cultural forms and value. Among these new cultural forms, Christianity and the modern idea of religion were pivotal components (cfr. Isomae 2012: 228-9).

The first cultural engagement of the Japanese with the modern concept of religion was primarily a matter of diplomacy and translations of diplomatic treatises with Euro-American powers which

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[93] This is attested, among other things, by the institution of the Office for the Investigation of Barbarian Books (*Bansho Shirabesho*) in 1856, by the slogan *tōyō dōtoku, seiyō geijustu* ("eastern ethics and western science") coined by Sakuma Shōzan (1811 – 64) and by the various travels abroad to study Euro-Americans knowledge conducted already from the 1860s (Gordon 2003: 73-4).

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 counterpart noticed. The first attempts to translate religions, in fact, attest the "influence of the Christian prototype on the process of choosing 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 United States, were *shūhō* (lineage or school's law) and *shūshi* (lineage or school's principle). The former originally indicated practices and regulation pertaining a certain Buddhist school, and was here used for "religion", the latter originally indicated the doctrine of a certain Buddhist school, and was here used for "religiously". In this treaty "religion" as a concept seems still not applied also for the Japanese context, and seems not having an 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) (cfr. 105-7).

In following tractates there is still no fixed terms concerning "religion", and the terms chosen 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, 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 that 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. Tsuda Mamichi (1829 - 1903) regarded instead religion as essential for public morality and the promotion of civilization, and that Christianity could be a feasible choice on this regard. Kashiwabara Takaaki (1835–1910) argued for a guidance by the state towards the right religion and away from 'heresy' or savage religion, in a way similar to what the 'West' already did. In fact, several thinkers distinguished between 'religion' and 'superstitions', especially those concerned with warding off supernational influence, which were defined as *meishin* ("delusionary beliefs") (cfr. Josephson 2012: 228-42).

Concerning these latter, it must be noted that already from 1870 the new Meiji government 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 modifications to unequal international treaties. These suppressing measured addressed both everyday-life customs, for example with bans on public nudity, as well as popular customs linked to religious practices such as dancing *nembutsu*, dancing and lighting fires for the Bon festival, certain form of divination, phallic statues 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 motivations, 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 (cfr. *ib.* 185-202).

In summary, religion was no more seen as a 'Western' peculiarity to be permitted, but as an essential aspect of Euro-American civilization, especially for morality aspects. Such 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 (see above 4.2.2). This further contributed to the significance of what, in a 1881 reference book called *Tetsugaku jii* (Philosophy Glossary), will be eventually attested as *shūkyō* (Isomae 2012: 231, 233).

While intellectuals where debating on religion, the Meiji government launched in 1870 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 modernization reforms with 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 to the Buddhist intellectual Shimaji Mokurai (1838-1911) to make 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 an 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, using however the term *shinkyō* (lit. "belief 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 in Japan, such as the idea of the clash between science and Christianity, and the theory of a universal evolution from 'religion of nature' to 'religion of civilization' and then finally from religion to ethics (cfr. above the first paragraphs of 4.2.3). These ideas made the previous fascination with Christianity as marker of civilization to fade, 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 the strong connection with the past Tokugawa regime, was then reduced by influential thinker Inoue Tetsujirō (1855-1944) as philosophy, also because of the the fact that, as we have seen (4.2.1), Confucianism fits with great difficulty into the taxonomic frame of the modern idea of religion/*shūkyō* (cfr. Paramore 2015: 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 create 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 suited for modern times. For example, Shin Buddhist Kiyozawa Manshi (1863–1903) proposed a Buddhist reform based on spiritualism (*seishinshugi*) - i.e. self-cultivation based on introspection and ascetism – and a return on the original writings of the founder Shinran (1173-1263), but open to any other schools. He also emphasized the need of fulfilling social responsibilities and assuring one's own self-wellbeing, 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 *karman* as a rational mechanistic, cause-and-effect worldview (cfr. 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 remined 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 (see more *infra* 4.3.3). 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 (see e.g. Astley 2006), founded by charismatic figures, that grew rapidly from the second half of the 19th century onwards, and for this reason 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 practices of these new religions as fraudulent and irrational (Josephson 2012: 260-9).

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With this I conclude our short survey of the historical introductions of the concept of religion in 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 of the Aum Shinrikyō group in Tokyo caused a strong disaffection by Japanese to anything *shūkyō*-related, while there it did not affected the growing interest in the field of spirituality (*supirichuariti*) or spiritual world (*seishin sekai*) (Prhol & Nelson 2012:12, see 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 freer religious quest by (see e.g. Yang 2011). I have not provided further examples such as South Asian countries as it would have taken too much space, but they will be considered when examining the issue of 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 concept is supposed to refer to something pertaining to a separate, inner and/or *sui generis* dimension of human existence (see above 1.7.2 and 1.7.4), it has been instead implemented, debated and negotiated as a standard of civilization. Faced with powerful and threatening interlocutors, Asian cultures tactically absorbed, elaborated and applied to themselves, among other things, 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 (1.7.2). I employ the adverb "tactically" to indicate also 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 above cited (4.3) comes starkly to the fore.

4.3.2 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 Jesuits' reports from China, characterized by high regard and admiration for Chinese civilization, in particular for Confucianism. To a large extent this was due to the agenda of Jesuits, who, 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, looking at 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 represented also the first steps of 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 (48). However, if "enlightened" Confucianism was the proof that 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 Jesuits' perspective, especially on Daoism, would be the authoritative one for almost two centuries (Clarke 2000: 39-42).

By the end of 18th century this intellectual enthusiasm for China, together with other cultural trends such as the cult of *chinoiserie*, faded, probably for being too much inflated and due also to the expulsion of the Christian missionaries from China in 1770. 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 advocated thus 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: 417-8) calls "Utilitarians", or "Anglicists" because they argued that 'Western' knowledge in English should displace the 'Eastern' one. The most prominent 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 monarchy or republic. Asians people, instead, are characterized by an extreme temperament and are organized into large empires whose normal and distinctive political institution is 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 of justify the policies of the East India Company, the romantics saw this same opposition as something valuable. What was worthless for the utilitarian-minded ones 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 ground of the Enlightenment deep-belief of the unity of human mind. The *Upaniṣad* attracted the attention of the romantics under many aspects. Among the most fascinating ideas there was the monistic notion of *Brahman* behind the plurality of earlier Vedas 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 (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 of the idea of a fundamental unity of all living beings (61-2). Similarly, the allegorizing of Vedic ritual in the *Upaniṣad* was read through anti-clerical and anti-ritualistic sentiments (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 for 'Eastern' civilizations, also beyond the limited circle of 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" (Clark 1997: 73). As anticipated above (1.7.1) one of the prominent 'discoveries' (or better say construction) in this regard was Buddhism, sparkled by the unearthing in Nepal of near 400 Sanskrit and Tibetan manuscripts, previously unknown.

It was the French scholar Eugène Burnouf (1801–52) who mostly handled their translation. His work in this field was immensely impactful, 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 naivete, Bornouf presented the Buddha as a human philosopher who offered his teachings of freedom from 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 on 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. Thomas W. Rhys Davids (1843–1922), founder in 1881 of the Pali 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, as for him in what the Buddha taught one could detect Enlightenment ideas and values such as reason, empirical observation, suspicion of authority, freedom of thought, and, notably, 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, see 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 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 further reinforced also in regard to Hinduism, and the romantic admiration for the speculation of the *Upaniṣad*, or the mythological imagery of the *Veda* was mitigated by the assumption that the present messy and chaotic situation was a subsequent degeneration from this ancient common textual root (cfr. King 1999: 128ff).

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 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 to Buddhism over Christianity on the ground 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 gave new impetus also 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*. He anyway followed the old Jesuits' judgment and interpreted the religious Daoism as degradation of this tradition of thought in form of superstition (Clark 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 in its most elementary and infantile stage. Other influential sinologists such as James Legge, 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 (Clark 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 idea 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 (1822–82), a transcendentalist who published a popular three-volume work entitled *Oriental Religions and Their Relation to Universal Religion* (1873-7), in which it is argued that Christianity

will ultimately lay the foundations of this 'Universal Religion', but not before being 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 of ascetism or pessimistic worldviews. However, also Johnson ultimately laments that such enlightened teachings were transformed into superstitions such as astrology or alchemy (Clark 1997: 83-7, Clark 2000: 45-6).

As anticipated above (1.7.1. n. 12 and 4.2.2), 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 persons interested in probing that grey area between science and religions, such as mesmerism or spiritualism. Blavasky conjoined Neoplatonism, 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*, *karman*, 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) 'East-West' dialogue. They got in touch with Arya Samāj and Brāhmo Samāj in India, and with Buddhists in Ceylon and in Japan. On a total of 400 branches in India, Europe, and America, more than 100 branches existed in India in 1884. 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 them being the 1983 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago (Clarke 1997: 89-92).

4.3.3. Self-orientalistic representations of East Asian religions in international venues

The World Parliament of Religions held in 1893 was an initiative held in conjunction with the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. As many studies have observed (Katelaar 1990, Seager 1995, Snodgrass 2003), this event was organized 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 in which all other traditions would eventually transform into.

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 (see above 4.3.1). Therefore, they felt confident in promoting their religions 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 (4.3), 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 Vivekananda (1863-1902). He received an English Education at Scottish Presbyterian College in Calcutta. In his youth he was involved in the Brahmo Samaj and was 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 he 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 comfortable in worshiping also 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 has been also argued that Vivekananda 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, Vivekananda's Vedanta 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 divine nature can be expressed not only in ascetic practice, but also in this-worldly activities, and therefore Vedanta 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 kinds of individual, mental and/or physical discipline focused towards the manifestation of such divinity. This idea of divine in each person resonated furthermore to the increasingly appealing values of self-realization and religious individualism (cfr. Jackson C. 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 to 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: 212-3, 218-17).

In general, if Vivekananda capitalized more on late-Romantics 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. His 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; schools and missionaries which disseminated Euro-American ideas and values but also fueled, with their criticism to Buddhism, 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 (cfr. also above 4.2.2).

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 must become a major force of Sinhalese society, uniting strong ethical and ascetic commitments without renouncing to worldly activities, notably the political ones aimed at independence (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" (Dharmapala 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 in Japan the newly formed "Council of all Buddhist schools" still held sectarian views, the delegates accepted this identification of Japanese Buddhism with a larger individualized unit called Mahāyāna. Therefore, they endeavored 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, avoid mentioning their practice of eating 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 grow and decay, and that therefore it was consistent with science. The argumentation was that it is a view of the universe in a continual, but ultimately conservative, change of states of matter that do 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 (212-3). 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 (207-9).

Another Buddhist reformer, which did not participate at the Parliament but sought in many ways to convivence the Euro-American interlocutors 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 20th century. Among his essays and lectures there is also 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 Pung Kwang Yu, first secretary of the Chinese legation in Washington, presented the Confucian perspective as very unsympathetic to religious proselytism or theological quarrels, rehearsing the reforming instances of fellows Confucians against all those illicit cults (*yinci*) or superstitious (*mixin*) holding back the modernization of the decadent Qing empire (cfr. McRae 1991: 28-9; Seager 1995: 104-5; see above 4.3.1). The anonymous paper of Daoism, on the other hand, reproduced the coeval scholarly stereotypes by lamenting the corruption of the virtues of the philosopher Laozi into a religion of magic and alchemy, and expressed the need of 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. Vivekananda addressed indirectly this issue through the Hindu relationship to Buddhism. He explained that India, which gave birth to the oldest and most successful the greatest missionary religions of all time, i.e. Buddhism, had nonetheless re-absorbed it within itself in the long run, so that Buddhism is presently just a 'sect'. By explicitly deriving the basic doctrines of Christianity and its missionary impetus from Buddhism, Vivekananda was implicitly aiming for an inclusivistic neutralization of Christianity. This view is further supported by the fact that, while he preached universal tolerance, openness, harmony and the synthesis of all religions of 'East and West', he also preached that this very program is the essence of Vedanta, which came 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 to be perceived as the real 'contender' of Christianity, and Buddhists representatives acted accordingly. Dharmapāla, on the ground of his presentation of Buddhist 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 or Bruno. On the same line of reasoning of Sōen, Dharmapāla contended that the Buddhist view of an eternal and ever-changing cosmos not only is congruent with science, but also excludes any creator god, which proves the superiority of Buddhism over Semitic religions that "have neither psychology nor a scientific background" (Dharmapala 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 not-civilized heathens or idolatrous 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, it was only a manifestation of the one encompassing Truth which adapted itself to the varying needs of the people. Therefore, Japanese are not idolaters, but instead people who have a long-held attitude of nonsectarianism and progressive tolerance. On the other hand, he critically observed that the so-called Christians, i.e. Euro-Americans that came in Japan with contemptuous attitude and that forced 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; cfr. 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 of nationalism and international policy were also at stake. Dharmapāla and Vivekananda 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 for the essential role for Buddhism in the expanding empire of Japan and that this was the proof that the Japanese were not heathen idolaters as therefore not deserving the inequal treaties.

The World Parliament of Religion of 1893, and with it the passage from the 19th to the 20th 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, Vivekananda 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: 48ff). However, we can see at this point 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, cfr. also 95-7).

4.3.4 New interpretations of East Asian religions in changing contexts

Concerning Buddhism, in the short term the Parliament resulted in a failure for Japanese's effort in improving the reputation of Mahāyāna. In fact, the authority on Buddhism remained in the hand of Pali philologists, who were still unconvinced and rather contemptuous towards the arguments of the Japanese delegation (cfr. 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, he got in touch with him who, in turn, sent to Carus his disciple Suzuki Daitestu (born Suzuki Teitarō, 1870 -1966) 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'' (1906-7), provocatively published in the Journal of the Pali 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" (cfr. above 4.2.3), 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 in his writing increasingly emphasized the notion of "zen 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 in to its (often rethorical) 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 flips over also 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 (cfr. e.g. the *kokugaku* phenomenon above 4.2.2) 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 1920s onwards through his writings and numerous trips and conferences. Arguably, his ideas were greatly favored by the changed intellectual and cultural *mileu*. For example, as we have seen above (1.3, 1.7.4 and 4.2.3) 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, to posit a transcultural common ground to all religious traditions and, on the other, to epistemologically shield it 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 like 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 failure 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, 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 *Dharma Bums* (1959), on the other hand, further established in the counter-culture movement, in the New Age movements, and beyond, the idea that Zen, as well as other 'oriental wisdoms', may represents an alternative to scientific rationalism, to religious traditionalism and to a materialistic lifestyle (Clark 1997: 103-5).

In tandem to the general tendence 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 G. 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 as an attempt to overcome the previous, problematic perspectives inherent to 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* on 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 in the late 1920s to translations of the *Yijing* and a Daoist inner alchemy text translated as *The Secret of the Golden Flower*.[94] 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 took 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 superstitions, 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 starts now to be seen in a positive light, probably because, as Urban suggests, in the midst of the horrors of war, since the Tantra was seen as the "most transgressive and violent path to the sacred - beyond good and evil, in violation of conventional law" it came to be considered as "the most appropriate - perhaps unavoidable - religion for this darkest, most violent of epochs" (Urban 2003: 185-6, see 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. For him, who was drawn also to the works of Jung, Tantrism reflects 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 (1.3, 1.7.4), were also meant

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

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 was 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 the fallen modern man, thanks to its imagery of sexual intercourses 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 the modern malaise such as democracies guided by weaklings and the repressing, unhealthy Christian morals. Tantrism offers a path of the "virile hero who dares to transgress the laws that bind other human beings" (196) and forces man to embrace both its sexual and violent aspect as means of liberation from decadent times in which the superiors are subjected to the rule of the many, towards the construction of a society of aristocratic and hierarchical rule.

Apart from the reception and reelaboration at the intellectual and textual level, we can see, especially after World War II, a shift towards the "technologization" of East Asian traditions. That is, 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 growing appeal of the inner, psychological sphere combined itself with the common sense of 'technological neutrality' brought by advancement in applied science and consumerism. What resulted was the paradox that 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, see also Payne 2018: 10-4). A pivotal role in this sense has also been played by a peculiar development in Theravada Buddhism, called 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 of 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 the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* ("Sutra on the Foundations of Mindfulness") and the treatise *Visuddhimagga* ("Path of Purification"), reformers like the Burmese monk Mahāsī Sayādaw (1904–82) 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 (see Sharf 1995: 252-9; Crosby 2013: 157-

169). 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 whatever appears to consciousness *hic-et-nunc*. These kinds of interpretations contributed to see meditation more as a psychological method - a "science of mind", as Thera called it - and lead also to straightforwardly de-contextualized and "technologized" outcomes such as the "mindfulness-based stress reduction programme" (MBSR). This was developed in 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 linked also to the neurology- and cognitive sciences-based research on meditation that start appearing from the 1960s (cfr. Macmahan 2008: 204-7, Sharf 2015).

This modality of reception of Asian traditions as mainly practice well applies also to the case of the popularization of Daoism. From 1960s, changes in the immigration laws brought more Chinese to North America, and some of them, while not being Daoist in terms of any formal institutional affiliation, were experienced in various Chinese meditations and bodily techniques. One of the most famous (and successful) of them is Mantak Chia (b. 1944), a Thai-born Chinese who had a background in both Chinese and Euro-American medicine and also underwent a training in traditional Daoist practices. He opened in 1979 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 kinds of student, it teaches simplified system of breathing, visualization, meditation, and postures based on the Daoist practice of Inner Alchemy. According to Palmer and Siegler, popular Daoism seems fitting rather well in 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 these presented in popular 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 by 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 (cfr. 141-64).

A similar discussion applies also to the Tantric tradition, whose burst into popular culture started arounf the 1960s and was prepared by previous scandals such as the foundation of the "Tantrik Order" already in 1900s America by Pierre Arnold Bernard (1875? -1955), or 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 magick" in which themes of Euro-American occultism and Tantrism were weaved into magical practiced that involved sexual intercourse. Both persons have been 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 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) of Omar Garrison, which depicted it both as a sort of a 'cult of ecstasy' or 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 e.g. a terrifying yet erotic Mother Kali was a powerful metaphor to address the lack, in the repressive 'West', of the liberating role of sex and femininity. These developments, in turn, triggered a wave of gurus arrived in America in the 1970s, such as famous Osho-Rajneesh (1931-1990) who "have accepted the identification of Tantra with sex and have 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 see *ib.* 222-83).

As a way to conclude, not only this section but the whole discussion started at 4.3, 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-representation of the 'East' came out.

Consistently 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 three 'E': exoticism, eroticism and esotericism. In other words, a series of characteristic that fit well with the contemporary discourses on spirituality (4.2.4). 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 form nowadays 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.

4.4. 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 East Asian religious traditions, we implicitly stress the fact the there are certain phenomena whose characteristics 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 "inner dimension", i.e. 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 (4.2.3). 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 well-defined, distinguishing set of beliefs. Many traditions, such as in the case of the India subcontinent, may partake, with different interpretations, to certain common tenets, while diverging in many others (4.2.2). 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 cases such as that of *kami*-related belief and Buddhism, resulted in a new self-conscious identification as 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' (4.2.1). Furthermore, the historical sketch of the dynamic interplay of self- and hetero-representations of East Asian religion (4.3) has shown how the

ideas and conceptual knots around which these partial representations were construed basically corresponded to those concepts building up the modern Euro-American paradigm of religion. Indeed, when there is a certain paradigm at work concerning what religion should be, it logically entails that positive appreciation goes to what fulfill the expectation of that paradigm, and deprecation goes for what goes against it. We saw for example the general positive reception of the 'original' Buddhism as inner-word oriented, highly ethical religious tradition preached by a well- defined founder who established clear principles such as the Four Noble Truths (1.7.1 and 4.3.2). There was, of course, other pivotal issues being 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 (1.7.1, 1.7.2, 4.3.2, 4.3.3).

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 religions as clear system of beliefs that must be engaged by a rational individual in an inner-worldly, ethical modality, may shift, often with polemical intentions, towards a higher appreciation of 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 (4.3.4, 4.2.4). Much more importantly, we should also be wary of not falling into that '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 such as the *Upaniṣad* or the *Daodejing* gave birth to religions full of ritual trappings and superstitions (4.3.2). 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 latter - has led to profound adaptation and modifications in the landscape of East Asian religions, development that actually fit within a modern paradigm of religion. To give a concrete, yet ideal example,[95] it may be not too difficult to find, especially in a urban area, a Buddhist monk, well inserted in his institutional organization, who considers his religion as 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 values complex Buddhism rituals as a way to maintain community bonds and reaffirm

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[95] I cite here one of the ideal portraits draws 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" (27).

commitments, but he strives however to simplify them in order to draw more lay people. He is uncomfortable with those practices, often involving spirits worship or manipulation, aimed at seeking mainly prosperity and profit. He tries therefore 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 also thinks 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 is in a highly influential position, together with other renowned Buddhist leaders such as the 14th Dalai Lama or the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh.

In summary, trying to deal simultaneously with the "epistemological" and "historical challenge" represents an additional challenge, which can be summarized in the following, somehow paradoxical consideration: what we are trying to do is avoiding the imposition of certain paradigms to 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 those geographical borders, but are increasingly gaining a global and diffused character, not only through established links with historical institutions, but also through the eclecticism of contemporary spirituality.

Having delved in detail in these problematic aspects and possible shortcomings in the study and representations of East Asian religions, we are now able to weave together the various topics discussed in the previous chapters and address the relevance that the theme of East Asian religions may represent for a SoR based RE, also in reference to established non-confessional RE such as the English case.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, PROPOSALS AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Towards a model for teaching East Asian religions

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" (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" (1993: 91). Calvani, Bonaiuti & 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" (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" (2013: 37).

Moreover, consistent with the general theoretical shift in the overarching paradigms from Cognitivism to Constructivism (see above 2.2), 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 the 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 (cfr. 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, it is useful for our treatment of the concept of model to recall from above (2.2) that conceptualizing the object of study of didactics, i.e. teaching- learning, with a rigid substantial definition pointing to the 'ontological core' of the phenomenon, is not very useful. 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)" (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. Through the saturation of a certain numbers of variables, the object of research became more or less specified. For example, focusing on the variables of persons, contexts and activities, relates to the research object of general didactics, while focusing on the variables of contents and epistemologies relates to the research object of disciplinary didactics.

I draw from these reflections and I take in consideration a certain number of variables for my model of "East Asian religions teaching". It somehow recalls the scheme of Didactic Transposition discussed in 2.3 and 2.3.1-4. 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 (2.3.4) how the axiological dimension, i.e. the choice of certain social practices of reference, influences, implicitly or explicitly, 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 competences 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 (cfr. above 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 e 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, we have seen above in the case the study of religion\s (1.9), may have their own relevance to society. Moreover, within a same discipline, axiom, paradigms and, above all, findings and conclusions, are not necessarily coherent nor homogenized (cfr. chap. 1 *passim*). Therefore, certain social practices of relevance may be favored while other may be or undermine and excluded, on the base of selected premises. To provide a quick example, the deconstructionist trend of the study of religion\s automatically excludes a RE whose social practice concerns 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 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 the topic of East Asian Religion is a pivotal (albeit not the only) 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 interest 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 (cfr. above 2.3). 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.

On the basis of the reflections above, in what follows I will develop a 'model' for teaching 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 which, as 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 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 take stock of what has been explored in the previous chapters. Notably, we will have the chance to gauge the extent in which all the various English RE models analyzed in chapter 3 are more or less 'compatible' to, or more or less 'insightful' in regard to a RE approach which is thoroughly based on the study of religion\s, focused on the theme of East Asian religions and aimed towards intercultural education. At the same time, I will draw and discuss additional insights from the work of those scholars, in 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 reason explained in the second part of 3.1, 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 (Cfr. 3.2.1).

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 perspectives 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 (cfr. REC 2013:25) and ultimately being more "confident" and "positive" about one's own religious (or non-religious) identity and ideas (Cfr. 3.2.2, 3.2.3).

We have seen how the *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 (3.2.4).

For Jackson and O'Grady, the educative value of RE consists in its capacity to positively address the present multicultural and multireligious 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 (3.3.5). At the same time, 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 (3.3.4, 3.3.5, 3.3.6).

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 strand 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 (3.4.6)

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 also 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 religious 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 (3.5.5).

<center>∗∗∗</center>

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?

T. 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 (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 analyzing social reality in a rational and independent way. Objectives such as fostering tolerance are of secondary importance (2008). The rational 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 (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 (39ff, see above 1.7). 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 (34ff).

Alberts (2007: 353ff) has similar arguments for the exclusive choice of the Study of religion\s. The development of this discipline (see above 1.3. and 1.4.) 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 consciousness, 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 (cfr. 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 larger frames of interculturality (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 and Saggioro 2011: 143). While reiterating the neutral position of the history of religion 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, with Blaish 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 (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 "mentalement à la place de personnes de différentes obédiences religieuses ainsi que de personnes athées ou indifférentes à la religion" (Frank and Blaish 2017: 75). This is what should ease 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" see above 3.1) 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 communications, not for the sake of answering spiritual needs but for the sake of social education and in order to create conscious citizens (2013: 91).

It is useful at this point to also recall the social/educational value that scholars have attributed to the study of religion\s in itself. We have seen (1.9) that it is desirable to have a substantive knowledge regarding religious phenomena because, in increasingly multireligious 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 (see above 1.7.4 and *infra* 5.3.1), 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 as a "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 (1.7.2), and how the dyad "religion-secularity" has then been imposed to, but also tactically employed by, other civilizations (1.7.3 and 4.3.1). 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 (3.5.5). 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 (see above 2.4.1, 2.4.2 and 2.4.3.), 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 (see above 2.4.5, esp. Hardy and Hussain 207 and Mansuri and 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 T. 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 of identity. Furthermore, the same approach should be translated into critical self-awareness, especially of those hidden assumptions concerning religions. In a nutshell, Alberts's 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 (2.4.2) 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 identarian 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 plurality and diversity is likewise worth taking into consideration (cfr. above 3.3.5).

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At this point, in order to provide us with a general framework that enables us to coherently synthesize these various insights and also provides 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 commitment 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 wellbeing 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 (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 type 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 positively cope with democratic and intercultural situations (2018: 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 these knowledges, perspectives and methods of the Study of religion\s - and in particular of the Study of East Asian religions - may be conductive to educational outcomes proper to intercultural and citizenship education.

Differently from other competence schemes (cfr. 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" (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 likewise 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 furthermore important also 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 "skill", 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 alternative 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, and this could run the risk of essentializing and imposing an ethnocentric point of view (cfr. above 1.7), and 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, economies, 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, religions.

It should be clear by now that what we have been discussing so far is an educational perspective increasingly diverging from those of other English RE authors, from their axiology and their selected social practice of reference. For example, we are discussing something different from the importance, bestowed by Wright, of rationally determining the coherence of a certain religious or not religious truth-claims, or the importance, for Erricker, of addressing the personal, spiritual and existential development of the individual. I would argue, furthermore, that these approaches are instead detrimental, or at last incur the high risk of hindering the general educational objectives we set up above. I reserve a similar judgement for Jackson's and O'Grady's emphasis on the personal and existential involvement of the learners in terms of spiritual needs, ultimate questions and development of religious/spiritual identity. However, in order to substantiate these charges, we need to address the other variables in our developing model, starting with the epistemological one.

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 the 3rd chapter 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 characterized by 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 (3.2.2).

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 (3.2.3).

The *2018 Report on Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward* represents a clear change and 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 genus 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 nonreligious worldviews is not clear-cut. In order to heuristically define the religious nature 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 (3.2.4).

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". 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 (3.3.2). 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 (3.3.4).

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 is their focus on transcendental realities and the revelation of some 'truths' which answer to ethical and existential dilemmas (3.3.2). O' Grady 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 (3.3.4).

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". And this is what is pursued not only by religious traditions, but by all worldviews, including secularist, agnostic or

postmodern 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 (3.4.2).

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 (3.4.2). We have seen (3.4.4 and 3.4.5) 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.

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 worldviews". 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 socially contextualized. By studying them, pupils construe also their own worldviews (3.5.2). The issues of how a religion should be actually inquired is not discussed in great detail. We have seen (3.5.6) 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.

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 - quite ambiguous - definition 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 (3.5.2). We have also seen (3.5.5) 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.

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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 (1.8) a cluster of interrelated, common meta-methods: *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 casually connected. However, strict, natural law-like casual connection 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 ideas 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 (cfr. also above 2.3.4). 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 the 1st chapter, by the deconstructionist approach, that represents the second disciplinary matrix, the "*déconstructionniste*" one. This latter puts "la relation implicite entre l'historien·ne des religions et le christianisme" at the center of its approach (89), which must be unfolded through the analysis of certain key aspects, arranged in the 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 "une porte d'accès (à côté de l'économie, du langage, 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" (*ib.*).[96] For Meylan, this is the only matrix that can both exclude the apologetic dimension and give a factual knowledge of what are usually labeled as religious traditions.

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[96] Since another scholar such as T. Jensen (personal communication, see 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).

Indeed, also for T. 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)" (2020:195). To identify it, he offers a very simple (operational) definition of religion as "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 (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 overarching 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?" (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, 373-376) 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 (cfr. above 1.5 and 1.6): 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 multifaced 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 Critical discussion

At this point, I think we have seen enough arguments for criticizing certain aspects of English RE which I would highlight as clear examples of what should not be done in a RE that has its foundations in the academic study of religion\s, that aims at intercultural education and that wants to deal with East Asian religious traditions. These aspects to be criticized are the epistemological and axiological/educative dimensions of the "rational-theological approach" and the "existential-instrumental" approach.

Starting from the "rational-theological approach", as the label itself that I have chosen indicates, it 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 -frankly speaking - 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 Barns rightly criticize certain RE approaches, that interpret religions as being ultimately grounded on a universal dimension of emotional/experiential nature, for being actually a subtle and hegemonic form of Liberal Protestantism. However, their strict characterization of religion under philosophical and theological lens does not differ very much. It entails, in fact, a paradigm that we may label "Greek-Judeo-Christian" (cfr. 3.4.3) 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 (1.7.3). 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 diversion from this paradigm are uninfluential and even pernicious, because they hinder the simplified representations a tradition needs to undergo in order to be analyzed as a coherent whole (3.4.2., 3.4.3.). As can be surmised, this approach reinforces what has been already criticized as the world religions-paradigm (1.7.4). 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 (see 1.7 and 4.3.1) is completely ignored.

The theme of East Asian religion further corroborated our SoR-based critique to this approach. We have indeed seen (4.2.2) 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-a-vis* other traditions of thoughts 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 *karman*, 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 4.4.2 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 theological differences, they risk overlooking those phenomena where this fluidity is actually implemented, such as in the case of Japanese *kenmitsu* system. Similarly, referring to the grassroot level of practice in 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 (4.2.1). Finally, due to its almost exclusive focus on discussing matters concerning transcendence or the 'truth-of-the-order-of-things' in terms of their rational coherence, the theological-rational approach runs a serious risk. That is, to ignore religious practices such as those related to this-worldly concerns, e.g. in contemporary Japan, or such as those connected with spirit beliefs, e.g. in early Buddhism (4.2.3). Even worse, it run also the risk of dismissing these diffused aspects of religious tradition as superstitious degeneration from (supposedly) pure doctrines, replicating the first orientalist interpretations (4.3.3).

Upon these observations, it should also be clear that the general educational/axiological frame of this approach, which is aimed at nurturing a self-conscious religious (or anti-religious) person who is capable of assessing whether certain beliefs may be - using the very words of Barnes - "more true and others less true in certain respects" (2014: 213; cfr. 3.4.5), diverges seriously from the intercultural aims set above (5.2.2). First of all, claims such as those of Wright (cfr. 3.4.2. and 3.4.6) that worldviews, including non-religious ones, are to be compared, all in the same exact terms, in reference to the issue of ultimate reality, are clearly at odds with a secular framework. This latter should in fact also contemplate a-religious positions or, bluntly speaking, positions of persons with no interest in discussing transcendent matters (cfr. 3.4.5 n. 48). While it aims at preserving differences among religious traditions, the rational-theological approach does however apply the hegemonic paradigm of the doctrinal system of beliefs, ignoring thus the pivotal topic of socio-cultural complexities and fuzziness within religious traditions, between religious traditions, and between religious traditions and other dimension of human thought and behavior. While it puts forth the educational aim of fostering critical and analytical skills by discussing and debating in an open dialogue the rational coherence of normative claims, in order to make "responsible, self-critical choices about their participation in and attitude towards religious practices" (Barnes 2019: 126), 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. By unquestioningly assuming such a paradigm as the most relevant, this approach does not permit a critical self-analysis of, for example, what are the

historical and cultural reasons why we, modern Europeans, are led to think that this kind of paradigm is the only or the only relevant one. Moreover, this paradigm of religion surely does not foster openness to cultural otherness in situations when this 'other' does not merely differ in its doctrinal beliefs, but in the very fact that, to many practitioners of that 'other religion', the doctrinal beliefs on transcendent matters are scarcely meaningful and/or vary consistently in space and time.

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Let us shift to the "existential-instrumental approach". We have already seen how it does not make much sense to compare an epistemology inspired by the study of religion\s with the epistemology proposed by Hannam and Erricker. The reason is that the former aims of studying religions and religion primarily for the sake of increasing knowledge and understanding, while 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 variously reiterated, thanks to its constant self-criticism and historical consciousness, this discipline has been selected as the epistemological reference, 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 is studied begs the question of how much the partiality 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 modalities.

Erricker offers various examples (both key concepts and cycles of learning) in which his general aim of providing pupils with "existential/spiritual tool" from other religions is discernible. We have already seen one of his proposal of a cycle of learning with the key evaluative question: "How effective is the concept of samsara as an explanation of change?". It starts with the Communicate and Apply phase focused on the concept of change, then shifts to the Hindu concept of *saṃsāra* and contextualizes it with the image of a Śiva *naṭarāja*. As a result, one evaluation made by a pupil is that "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" (see 3.5.5). This seems to me more of a theological enquiry, 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 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 includes also 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. In other words, what we see here are clear examples of 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' (cfr. 4.3.2-4). Even the seemingly innocent choice of having pupils meditating[97] may perpetuate the rhetoric that religions, especially East Asian religions, cannot be fully understood in logical-discursive language. More seriously, it reinforces the modernist idea that, while meditation is the key practice[98] defining Buddhism as such, paradoxically, it is also a culture- and history-free technique easily detachable from its Buddhist context (cfr. 4.3.4).

A similar discourse can be made concerning Hannam. First of all, 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 address sufficiently '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 (cfr. 1.3, 1.7.4 and first part of 4.2.3). 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 (4.3.4), whose roots, we have seen, trace back to the romantic and transcendentalist movements (4.3.2). Indeed, in her example of a learning cycle on Buddhism (3.5.3), the overarching question "Can meditation help people overcome suffering" is explored by focusing mainly on the historical Buddha

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[97] The fact that the proposal to make pupils meditate is put forward without any consideration of other (actually more widespread) practices, such as offering incense, chanting or copying sutras, is indicative of the pervasiveness of modernist Buddhist discourses.

[98] Indeed, Erricker characterizes *karuṇā* as being developed by Buddhist by means of meditation (2010:137), which is a quite reductive, romantic and simplified definition.

and its first teachings, to shift then directly to the contemporary use of meditation as a tool for "recovering from post-traumatic stress disorder". The historical diversity of meditations - 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 19th 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 it is 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 postmodern 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 "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 counter-intuitive way ontological properties of object. In this case using the symbolism of ashes (cfr. 1.6 and also Jensen 2014 ch. 4 and 5). However, while our interpretation of 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 (4.2.3). 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" (cfr. 3.5.5), 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 the a – supposed - 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 the '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 the 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 (cfr. 4.2.3). 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 increase further 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 (5.2.2) that the educational aims chosen for our proposal of RE are grounded on the principle of neutrality in terms of religious orientation and the development of the competence of appreciating the complexities of cultures and religions in all their aspects. Among these latter are also 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. 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 to develop the emic, modern, Euro-American concept of existential/spiritual dimension, clearly does not help. Actually, it may even hinder the exploration of those entangled histories, often with power-related aspects, through which, for example, Hinduist or Daoist traditions shifted from being considered 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.

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As hinted above, similar considerations may be made towards Jackson's and O'Grady's approach, since also they dwell on the issue of personal development 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 (cfr. 3.3.5 and 3.3.6), I will discuss these matters in the context of the learning dimension (see *infra* 5.5.1).

In the final analysis, these ambiguities towards a detached, objective approach to religious traditions in both the "rational-theological" and "existential-instrumental" approaches can be ultimately related in 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 (cfr. also Alberts 2007:99-100) in accord to the possible interpretations of the aim of "learning about 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 relates to 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 and 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***" (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 discussing my own epistemological proposal.

5.3.3 Proposal

We have seen (2.3.1) 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, see 2.3.4) and Meylan (2015, see 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 consists of 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 (see e.g. 1.3; 1.4; 1.7.1, 1.7.4).

Accordingly, as a first step, we may say that from all the various discussions engaged in the 1st chapter, 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 (cf. 1.5; 1.6). This choice of a heuristic and elucidative approach, instead of an ontological 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 (1.7).

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 (1.6). Alberts, on this regard, (2007, see above 5.3.1) 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. We have seen that how he takes, as substantialist criterion, the reference to "superempirical realities", i.e. nonempirical realities treated as existing independently from empirical sources (2013, cfr. 1.5). 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, see 5.3.1) which includes also Z. 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 terms "religion" refers to a cultural (sub-)system that differs from others by way of a reference to superempirical 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 (1.6). Also, we must take into consideration the two fundamental approaches, the 'constructive' and 'deconstructive', within the study of religion\s (1.4, 1.7). I take here as guiding criterion (see 2.3.1) the didactic principle of *essentialization*, 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, see above 1.4) 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 (see above 1.7.1, 1.7.3).

"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). Albeit "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. 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 but while being 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 sese 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 has perished in time (cfr. 2.3., esp n° 23). 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 (cfr. 2.3.1). We have seen that Meylan (2015, 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 (see above 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 term of texts, doctrines and beliefs.

Since one of the fixed components of our discussion on epistemology is the topic of East Asian religions, what I want to point out here is 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 4.2, by looking at several examples of 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 frameworks shows little self-criticism - are instead unveiled as 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 e.g. Buddhist terms 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 explored in 4.3, 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. By 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' - is what we may call the educative agenda of "decolonization of knowledge" (Nye 2019: 8). Of course, this does not mean that any phenomenon that actually correspond to said partial representations should be labeled 'inauthentic' or dismissed because of being 'products of colonialism'. As observed also above in 4.4, 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 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 (2015: 97) 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* (my italics). 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 4.2.3 and in our critiques to the experiential-instrumental approach (5.3.2). 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 all these latter 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, see above 1.6). 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 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 "superempirical 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", 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 sentence, 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 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 (cfr. 4.2.1). I have added 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 or as concept and metaphor (cfr. 4.2.3). 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 (see above 4.2.3).

5.4. The teaching dimension
5.4.1 Recapitulation and further insights

As observed above in 2.3.2, 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 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 (see above 2.3; Clerc, Minder, Roduit 2006: 2).

For the discussion of the first topic, let us recall Chevallard's notion of "chronogenesis", that is, the evolution of the knowledge planned by the teacher, and the notion of "topogenesis", that is, 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 Buddhism according to its chronological evolution, or may there be alternative or complementary 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 Buddhism, how should it be represented in its inception in the 5th century BCE? As a doctrinal dismissal of early Brahmanical ideas? As a reaction to the changing economy and urbanization (cfr. Benavides 2005)? While the first choice may sound more customary, if a teacher sees it as an occasion to tackle the stereotype of religion as phenomenon concerned only with transcendent matters, s/he may also adopt the second option. 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 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.

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Starting our recapitulation from the 2018 *Report* on RE, we have seen (3.2.4) 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, we have seen (3.3.2) his proposal of a matrix on three 'levels': individual, membership group(s) and 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 internal and external borders of a given tradition. We also have seen (3.3.3) 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 (3.4.2-3).

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 (3.3.5).

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 *infra* in the learning dimension (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 exchange processes (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. (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 (cfr. also above 3.1). 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 crosscutting 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 film and in advertising (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.

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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 vs 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 'gray' 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 meta-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" (cfr. above 1.7.1 and 1.7.4). 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: if we want to provide a critical perspective 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 issue 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" 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 very selection of data, a process which permits the acquisition of the said data at the same time.

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Saggioro and Giorda (2011, Giorda 2012) basically side with Alberts's 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 acknowledge 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" (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 metalanguage 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.

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The last author to be quickly cited as relevant to our discourse is T. 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'" (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 (cfr. 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 (see *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" (cfr. above 1.5) but mere tools. A move which is consistent with the nominalist attitude proposed above (5.3.1). 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 (2009, cfr. 2.3.2) that clear and detailed objectives of activities should be shared with the pupils.

This proposal of mine is a kind of elaboration of Alberts's 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 East Asian religions within RE, a first, general recommendation, consistently again with our epistemological stance, is that narratives and representations of East Asian Religions 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 East Asian religions in particular. We have explored some examples of the former in 1.7. and 4.2 and of latter in 4.3.2, 4.3.3 and 4.3.4. 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 (cfr. 1.7). 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-a-vis the other parts of the worlds. A 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 (1.5, 1.6). 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, concept 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 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 (cfr. 2.3.3 and *infra* 5.5) of the pupils, 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 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, 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 suggests (2011) 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 (4.3.), 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 (4.3), 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' non 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[99] to accommodate the large possible number of aspects. Several examples 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 (cfr. above 1.8 and synopsis in 5.3.1).

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[99] For example, we have seen in 4.2.1 and 4.2.2 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.

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 (4.2.1).

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) (see e.g. above 4.3.2). 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 *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 postcolonial 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 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 4.3) 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) (cfr. Carrette 2016). In other words, in our RE proposal 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.[100] Should feelings of discomfort 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 (cfr. above 5.2.2)

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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 East Asian traditions? Absolutely not. My primary aim is to provide guidance for handling East Asian religions 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" (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

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[100] 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 (2016: 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 (see above 4.2.3).

instinctively be labeled 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 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 religions. However, from a pragmatic point of view, we should consider the stratified history of deep-seated modern interpretations, self- and hetero-representations of East Asian religions as possible hurdles for free exploratory activities. In other words, individual or group research done through internet surfing, 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 U.K., variety may well not be assured, or modernist aspects of traditions may be overrepresented.[101]

As already observed in 2.3.2, 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 alii* (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[102]).

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[101] Cfr. the example chosen by Jackson and cited above 3.3.5. 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 (see Crosby 2014: 147ff).

[102] 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 (2011)'s ideas of modality of doing religions should also be implied.

- o 'Maps' of self- and hetero-representations and the dynamics of their historical entanglements.
- o 'Maps' of the interrelationship between the various layers and processes.
- o 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.
- o Technical terms of religious traditions.
- o Technical terms of the study of religion\s.

- Conceptual Knowledge
  - o Theoretical concepts and approaches to the study of religion\s.
  - o Concepts of Orientalism and Occidentalism.
  - o 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
  - o Baseline research methods: developing questions suitable for objects/ searching object suitable for posed questions.
  - o Meta-methods of *description*, *comparison*, *explanation*, *interpretation classification* and *contextualization*.
  - o Preparation, communication and mediating scholarly findings according to type of addressees.

- Metacognitive Knowledge
  - o Methodological agnosticism.
  - o Baseline epistemological awareness of the impossibility of a completely neutral or omnicomprehensive perspective and of the heuristic value of 'maps'.
  - o Drawing on research findings to act appropriately in situation (e.g. of conflict).
  - o 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 person 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 superstations. 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 superempirical 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 2.3.3. 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 East Asian religions, there are plenty of reasons (see 1.7 and 4.3) 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, I proceed now to recall and discuss certain aspects of the Interpretative-dialogical approach. The reason why I deal with it in our discussion of the learning dimension lies in the fact that the issues of motivation and engagement of the pupils, i.e. the moment in which the pupils takes personal charge of the construction of her/his own learning, are pivotal topics in Jackson and O'Grady's arguments. However, as always, connections with previous sections will be made.

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We have seen (3.3.5) that Jackson proposes the process of *reflexivity* as the third pillar of his approach, understood as "the relationship between the experience of students and the experience of those whose way of life they are attempting to interpret" (2009: 402). Since it is a learning process which is personal to the student, for Jackson there is no guarantee that it will happen, albeit many methods can be applied to facilitate it. *Reflexivity* consists of two elements. The first is *constructive criticism*, i.e. developing 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. The second is *edification*, i.e. the re-assessment of one's own worldview through the challenge of 'unpacking' the worldviews of others.

In the light of the previous discussions in this chapter, it is easy to see how *constructive criticism* and *edification* are key processes, 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   a) those aspects of East Asian religions that go against the grain of euro-centric ideas of religions and b) 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 (cfr. above

2.2) towards the learner, teaching arrangements should be carefully crafted in particular to ease these two pivotal processes.

Consequently, Jackson's stance of treating these processes as "personal to the student" (2008: 175) is a bit puzzling to me. However, we have seen (3.3.6) that this kind reflectivity, for Jackson and O'Grady, is not limited to the scholarly reflectivity we want to transpose in our RE, that is, a critical reflection on epistemological, ethical and political issues, but it also involves personal issues of religious/existential/identarian nature. As a matter of fact, O'Grady argues that, in order to engage pupils in RE, "the development of identity is the key question for adolescents" (2019: 47), which means that RE should enable the pupils "to link their own questions and concerns to religious material" (193). For him, pupils' responses from their dialogue with religious traditions have equal status to the material from religious traditions. Jackson goes even further and dismisses the distinction between the insider's and the outsider's perspective by affirming that the application of academic methods and standards should be open to critical scrutiny also from religious traditions (cfr. 1997: 140). Similarly, O'Grady cites a 'possible risk' of "failure to deal with the sacred" (2019: 180).

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 have to 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 fruitfully compared with a similar key feature in Swedish RE, which is called "life questions pedagogy" (see e.g. *ib*:.222ff and Berglund 2013) and is inscribed in the institutional provisions for RE. In a few words, life questions (Swd. *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?" (Berglund 2013:178).

> 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. (*ib.*).

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 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, also within the same tradition. Thirdly, to look at religions through the lense of *livsfrågor* runs the serious risk of creating stereotyped representations (178-81). These critiques are perfectly consistent with our discussions and observations about the risk of the 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 universality of religion (cfr. 1.7.2, 1.7.4, 4.2.3). We have already seen how this idea strongly influences the conceptualization of aims and contents of RE, as our critiques of the instrumental-existential approach (5.3.2) have shown.

In summary, on the bases of these observations, we may conclude that, if we want to provide a fair, complex account of religious traditions, especially East Asian traditions, the idea of linking the personal questions and concerns of pupils may be a seriously conflictual operation. As observed at the start of this section, it is reasonable to think that many pupils will expect, from RE, an inner dimension-centered paradigm of religions, and 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 propaedeutically discussed, it may well be that cognitive conflict will rise when they are presented e.g. with those aspect of East Asian religions discussed in 4.2.3. I wonder if any teachers 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 4.3, as a degeneration of the authentic Buddhism and not worthy of interest. If we were to follow O'Grady recommendations to plan the contents of RE lesson taking as guidelines the interests of the pupils, it may be that we will find ourselves in a dilemma: should we avoid certain topics because they are 'boring' or non-relevant to pupils' 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.

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I suspect that the numerous discussions about personal/spiritual/existential/identarian 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 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, part of perceived cultural or ethnic identity and so on.

As in the case of "life questions pedagogy" in Swedish RE, this emphasis on - supposedly neutral - existential issues may have been considered to be a kind of strategy to address simultaneously religious, a-religious and antireligious pupils. Another way of tackling this issue is that of the theological-rational approach, which aims to equip pupils with philosophical skills which would 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 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. T. 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)" (2019: 44). I do agree without hesitation to this key principle, and indeed I have indicated methodological agnosticism (see above) as a meta-cognitive 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 superempirical 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 superempirical 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 superempirical 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" (1996: 226), "doit évidemment être nuancée dans le cadre de l'école obligatoire" (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,

"l'expérience de l'élève doit par conséquent être subordonnée au concept construit, concept qui ne saurait en aucun cas correspondre exactement à une quelconque expérience" (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 (1997: 122), while for O'Grady it should not be excluded but instead addressed through critical and philosophical tools (2019: 193).

However, 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 T. 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" (2008: 136).

Similarly, we have already seen (5.2.1) that Saggioro and Giorda 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 (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 East Asian religions? In addition to what we have examined in 4.3, 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 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 superempirical 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 *mileu* 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 (see 4.2.4 and 4.3).

In other words, we may not be wrong in expecting that some pupils will be personally interested in East Asian religions, 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 (cfr. above 4.3.4). 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 meta-cognitive functions, such as the reconfiguration of previous knowledge in relation to new inputs (cfr. 2.3.2). I will try to deal with these issues in my proposal.

5.5.2 Proposal

Consistently with our nominalist epistemological approach, and to 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 explication and discussion of the underlying value framework (cfr. above 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 superempirical realities. At the same time, however, the possibility of tensions on empirical grounds must be acknowledged (cfr. TWB factors in 1.8).

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 (3.3.5), 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 dismission 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 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.[103] 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 concept of *nirvāṇa* of the famous Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna, 150–250), or very broad generalizations (e.g. the Chinese concept of *dao*) 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 (3.5.5) in which a pupil interprets an image of *Śiva naṭarāja* as "a symbol to show that my life is always changing". 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

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[103] On this regards cf., among others, Kasulis 2002, Pasqualotto 2008, Ghilardi 2012, Ma and Van Brakel 2016.

how the historical-cultural contexts strongly influence this process. In the example at hand, the various layers of meaning of *Śiva naṭarāja* (cosmological, mythical, 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 superempirical 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.[104] To substantiate my claim I need to give a sketchy account of his study.

Kasulis's 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 knowledge, limited only to those who have undergone similar training and similar experiences.

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[104] For a discussion of Kasulis's intercultural relevance see Lapis 2015.

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 4.3, 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 4.2 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 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 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 *karman*, *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 so-called Chinese popular religions or any kind of worship of local superhuman beings. 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 other's 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 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 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. The theme of East Asian traditions provide 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 historical-intellectual relationships between religion, colonialism, Orientalism, Occidentalism.

At the same time, the topic of 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, the topic of East Asian religions 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 summarizes 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' 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 *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 deconstrue 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: individual, membership groups and 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 connoted. 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 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.

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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 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 East Asian religions? How is the knowledge of these traditions shared and negotiated, for example through 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 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 religioux* 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/ODHIR or the *Signposts - Policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious world views in intercultural education* of the CoE. 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.[105] Outside Europe, interesting developments in RE are taking place in Quebec, the United States and South Africa. Finally, other stimulating inquiry could involve the analysis of how 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 a what is perceived as the mainstream tradition, i.e. in Japan, in China or in India.

From a point of view of didactics, further insights would have been gained, especially for what concerns the teaching and learning 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, and so on). However, this limitation is also due to the explicit theoretical approach of this 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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[105] 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.

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Estratto per riassunto della tesi di dottorato

L'estratto (max. 1000 battute) deve essere redatto sia in lingua italiana che in lingua inglese e nella lingua straniera eventualmente indicata dal Collegio dei docenti.

L'estratto va firmato e rilegato come ultimo foglio della tesi.

Studente: Giovanni Lapis _____ matricola: 815269 _____

Dottorato: Studi sull'Asia e sull'Africa _____

Ciclo: 33° _____

Titolo della tesi[1] : Religious Education and East Asian Religions. A Study-of-Religion\s Based Framework for Intercultural and Didactic Approaches _____

Abstract:

Italiano:

All'interno della ricerca sulle religioni vi è un nascente interesse per l'ambito della *Religious Education*, specialmente riguardo la scuola pubbliche. Vi sono in particolare studi normativi mirati a impostare un insegnamento pubblico non confessionale, basato sullo studio accademico delle religioni. Questo lavoro riflette sul ruolo che il tema delle religioni est-asiatiche può assumere in tal senso. Si individuano e discutono temi e concetti rilevanti provenienti dallo studio teorico delle religioni, dalla didattica, dall'educazione interculturale, nonché certi aspetti chiave dello studio delle religioni est-asiatiche. Quale pietra di paragone in tema di *Religious Education*, si considera e analizza il *case-study* dell'Inghilterra, considerato l'insegnamento non confessionale più sviluppato. Attraverso il confronto tra il *case-study* e una discussione interdisciplinare degli ambiti sopracitati, si mostra la rilevanza delle religioni est-asiatiche nell'indicare problematiche nascoste, nel potenziare taluni obiettivi e proporre nuove prospettive. Si organizzano quindi tali osservazioni in un quadro teorico-pratico per future applicazioni concrete in una prospettiva di educazione interculturale.

English:

Recently, within the study of religions, there is a growing interest in that variegated field of "Religious Education" (RE), especially for what concerns public schools. Normative studied, focused on how to set up a non-confessional public teaching based on the academic study of religions, begin to enter the debate. This thesis is intended to reflect on the role that the topic of east-Asian religions can play in this regard. To this end, relevant themes and concepts related to the theoretical study of religions, didactics, intercultural education, as well as certain key aspects of the study of east-Asian religions are identified and discussed. As a touchstone in RE approaches and practices, I consider and analyze the case study of England, considered the most developed in terms of a non-denominational teaching. Through the comparison with the case study and through an interdisciplinary discussion of the different academic areas mentioned above, I intend to show how the theme of the East-Asian religions can reveal hidden problems, enhance the achievement of certain objectives and propose new perspectives. I thus organize these observations in a theoretical-practical framework for future actual applications within a perspective of intercultural education.

Firma dello studente

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[1] Il titolo deve essere quello definitivo, uguale a quello che risulta stampato sulla copertina dell'elaborato consegnato.