

## 2 **Setting Up The Theoretical/ Analytical Framework**

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### **2.1 The Study of Religion\'. Definitions, Epistemologies and Representations**

#### **2.1.1 Historical Contextualization**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 2.1.2 Constructive Definitions. Basic Conceptualizations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> “(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 1966, 4; italics in the original).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

[Religions are] semantic and cognitive networks comprising ideas, behaviours and institutions in relation to counter-intuitive superhuman agents, objects and posits.

Explanation.

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

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

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

### 2.1.3 Deconstructive (Un)Definitions. Changing Point of View

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### 2.1.4 Constructive Epistemology. Basic Theoretical Structure and Applications

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 2.1.5 Deconstructive Epistemology. Genealogy and Critique

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 2.1.6 Epistemological Commonalities: Methodology

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

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

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

<sup>9</sup> In past, the privileged method has been the historical or philological one.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**15** Terms named after Paul Ricœur’s famous phrase “masters of suspicion” (Ricœur 1965).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

tual religious practices may contrast with official doctrinal positions.<sup>20</sup> Another TWB situation rises

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 2.1.7 Constructive Representations. Examples of Theory Building

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 2.1.8 Deconstructive Representations. Religion-Making Processes and Postcolonial Gaze

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

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

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

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

If we start by looking at the pre-modern situation in Europe, Asad (1993) argues that, in medieval times, Christianity was far from being an essentially distinct form of culture, or mode of reasoning and feeling, but functioned as an authorizing discourse embracing a vast domain of practices, power- and violence-related ones included. Even in reformation times, neither Luther nor Calvin believed in a state in the modern sense as being essentially separate from a religion understood as Christian truth. Fitzgerald argues that at least till the end of the seventeenth century, even if state and church were clearly identifiable, the ‘civil’ dimension did not have the same nuance of the modern ‘secular’. One example is what he calls the ‘encompassing religion’ in the case of England. What retrospectively we may call ‘politics’ were identifiable as an organic, ‘sacred’ or ‘ritual’ order in which everyone is born into a specific degree and vocation, in a fixed hierarchy established by God. By respecting one’s own duty, serving the king or one’s master, one was also serving for the divine well-being, in accord to God’s Providence (Fitzgerald 2007, chs 5, 6 and 8).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 2.2 Education. Translating Knowledge in Educational Contexts

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

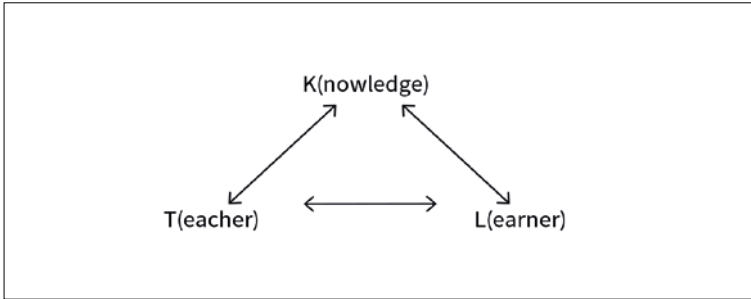
**35** Among its founding figures famous pedagogists like Maria Montessori (1870-1952) and John Dewey (1859-1952) are named.

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



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

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



**Figure 1** The didactic triangle

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

<sup>37</sup> Nigris 2013; D'Amore 2001; D'Amore, Frabboni 2005; Martini 2012.

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 2.2.2 Didactic Transposition. Fundamental Structure

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

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

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

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

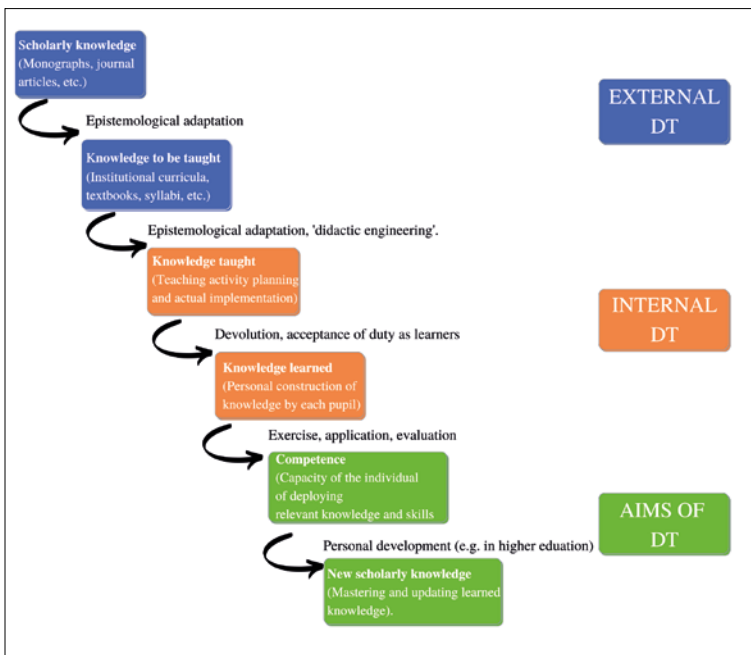


Figure 2 The structure of didactic transposition

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

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

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

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

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

### 2.2.3 Didactic Transposition. Epistemological Dimension

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 2.2.4 Didactic Transposition. Teaching Dimension

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

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

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

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

<sup>44</sup> "Le maître sait autrement" (Chevallard 1986, 75).

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 2.2.5 Didactic Transposition. Learning Dimension

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

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

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

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

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

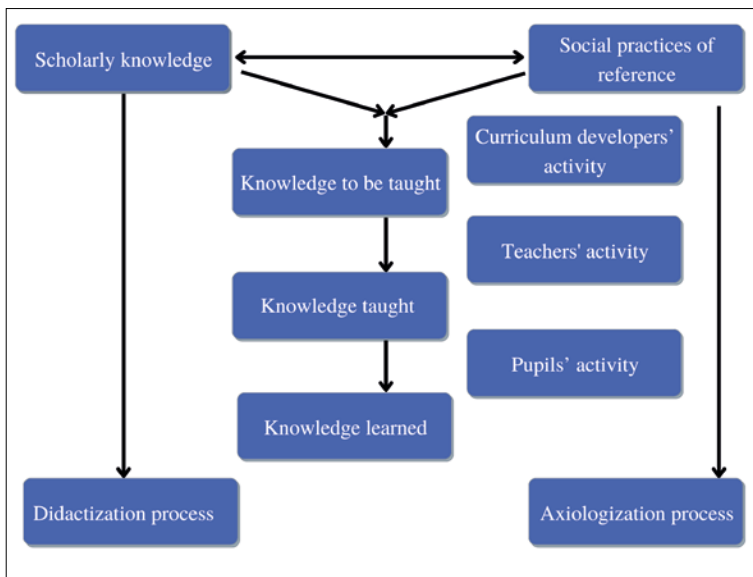
In this regard Guy Brusseau (2002, 82-3, 98-107) introduces the notion of "epistemological obstacles". In his view, an obstacle, similarly to the above-cited unripe models, is a kind of knowledge that has been useful at the moment of creation of a concept or in resolving a problem but fails when faced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

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

### 2.2.6 Didactic Transposition. Axiological Dimension

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

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



**Figure 3** Didactic transposition according to Develay

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 2.2.7 Intercultural Education. Context and Underlying Theory

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 2.2.8 Intercultural Education. Operational Indications

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

### 2.3 Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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