Religion, Education, and the 'East'
Addressing Orientalism and Interculturality in Religious Education
Through Japanese and East Asian Religions
Giovanni Lapis

4 Case-Study: Critical Analysis of English RE

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4.1 Introduction and Model for Analysis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.2 English RE: Historical Context and Institutional Framework

4.2.1 A Historical Sketch of English RE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.2.2 The National RE Frameworks and Other Developments

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Also in the case of the 2013 *Review of Religious Education in England*, we need to retrieve the implicit concept of religion. Here RE should contribute to education by

provoking challenging questions about meaning and purpose in life, beliefs about God, ultimate reality, issues of right and wrong and what it means to be human. (RE Council 2013, 14)

and RE pupils are expected to learn

about and from religions and worldviews in local, national and global contexts, to discover, explore and consider different answers to these questions. (RE Council 2013, 14)

Again, religions seem to be implicitly defined as answers to common 'challenging questions', and such answers are expressed "in coherent systems or ways of seeing the world" made up of "belief, teachings and sources of wisdom and authority including experience" (cf. 25).

This implicit conceptualization is consistent with the representations proposed. In KS1 pupils are expected to learn about beliefs and practices such as festivals and worship. A certain importance is given to the 'sources of wisdom', which include key texts such as the Bible, the Torah and the Bhagavad Gita, and the teachings of key persons from different traditions such as Buddha, Jesus Christ, Prophet Muhammad, Guru Nanak and humanist philosophers (14). KS1 pupils are to engage these 'sources' starting with the "moral value of stories" (25), while advanced pupils in KS3 or KS4-5, should focus on the investigation of "the influence and impact of religions and worldviews" (28) with a special emphasis on the key leaders, thinkers or founders of religions or worldviews. It is worth noting a better focus on the issue of inner diversity. Among the overall aims of RE, the importance of "recognising the diversity which exists within and between communities and amongst individuals" is explicitly affirmed (14). In summary, this framework is still based on a conception and representation of religions as phenomena being constituted primar-

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a "sense of wonder at the world in which they live", and in the "capacity to respond to questions of meaning and purpose" (13).

ily by beliefs and teachings written in official texts or expounded by individuals, which only afterwards are expressed in practices and thus influence individuals and communities. There is a stronger emphasis on inner diversity.

Concerning the epistemological underpinnings, we find both continuity and discontinuity with the previous framework. A general 'theological approach' is still endorsed, as pupils are asked to "understand, interpret and *evaluate* texts, sources of wisdom and authority and *other evidence*", as well as to identify, investigate and *respond to questions posed*, and responses offered by some of the sources of wisdom" (14; italics added). More specifically KS1 pupils should "think about and respond to 'big questions'" (20), while KS4-5 pupils should consider "theological questions about truth that arise, giving reasons for the ideas they hold" (26). Personal-existential perspectives are applied through "key concepts and questions of belonging, meaning, purpose and truth", to which pupils should respond 'creatively' (25). For example,

> linking to Science, students examine arguments about questions of origins and purpose in life (where do we come from? why are we here?). (27)

There is more explicit reference to disciplines that produce second-order knowledge about religions. KS1 pupils should start by using certain key words (holy, sacred, scripture, festival, symbol, humanist), while advanced pupils are expected to "use ideas from the sociology of religion, the psychology of religion or the philosophy of religion", and to "use ethnographic approach to interview believers representing diversity within a tradition" (26). Furthermore, there is a noteworthy suggestion for a theoretical exercise on the concept of religion itself:

> build an *understanding of religion itself as a phenomenon*, rather than merely studying religions and worldviews one by one, (26; italics added)

> consider and evaluate the question: what is religion? Analyse the nature of religion using the main disciplines by which religion is studied. (67)

However, there are some critical elements in this regard, from the perspective of the contemporary study of religion\s, like the suggestion of using ideas from phenomenology in order to tackle arguments which engage "profoundly with moral, religious and spiritual issues" (28). Other questionable suggestions concern inquiring about "spiritual experiences (such as sensing the presence of God, or the experi-

ence of answered prayer)" (25), or to see weather "religion and spirituality are similar or different" (26).[8]

Nonetheless, these recommendations represent a step toward the problematization of the concept of religion as an educative aim of RE. From a didactic transposition point of view, this may reflect a changed composition in the noosphere out of which this document has been issued. In fact, the composition of RE Council, as of October 2013, also includes bodies like the British Association for the Study of religion\s (BASR) and the Independent Schools Religious Studies Association (2).

Even if they are not explicitly used, 'learning about religion' and 'learning from religion' still adequately describe the general educational aims of this framework. 'Learning about religion' is now delineated with more reference to methods and approaches to the study of religion\s, while the 'learning from religion' attainment target does not change substantially the existential/personal development objectives set by the precedent document. For example, KS1 pupils are expected to "find out about questions of right and wrong and begin to express their ideas and opinions" (68) or to "think and talk about their own ideas about God" (20), while more advanced pupils should "express insights into significant moral and ethical questions [...] which invite personal response" (27).

From the point of view of intercultural and citizenship education, at KS1 it is suggested to foster a sense of cooperation by creating a 'recipe for living together happily' or a 'class charter for more kindness and less fighting' by drawing from different religious traditions (20). At KS3 it is suggested that engaging with controversial issues is at the heart of good RE as it helps to develop respectful disagreement. Accordingly, pupils should select a religious controversy to be investigated (26) and, in general, are expected to

> critically evaluate varied perspectives and approaches to issues of community cohesion, respect for all and mutual understanding, locally, nationally and globally. (28)

The recommendations of the Commission on Religious Education (CoRe) in the 2018 report *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward* propose some noteworthy innovations, starting from the name of the subject, which should change from 'Religious Education' to 'Religion and Worldviews'.[9] This change of name also reflects a different approach towards the subject matter itself. That is, a concern

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8 We have addressed the (false) question of religion and spirituality above (§ 3.2.4).

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

over the problematic nature of the concepts of 'religion' and 'worldviews' and of the necessity to address this theoretical step is sharply evident. In other words, differently from the previous documents, we are provided with a definition of religions, or, to be more precise, a definition of the 'worldview' of which religions are conceived as a subgenre. For this report, a worldview is:

> An overarching conceptual structure, a philosophy of life or an approach to life which structures how a person understands the nature of the world and their place in it. Worldviews encompass many, and sometimes all, aspects of human life – they influence how people understand what is real and what is not, how they decide what is good and what to do, how they relate to others, and how they express themselves, to name but a few examples. […] Worldviews should not be understood merely as sets of propositional beliefs. They also have emotional, affiliative (belonging) and behavioural dimensions. (CoRe 2018, 72)

Such worldviews are, strictly speaking, peculiar to any individual. They develop dynamically, influencing and being influenced by individuals' "beliefs, values, behaviors, experiences, identities and commitments" (4). Those worldviews that are shared and organized by certain groups and embedded in institutions are defined 'institutional worldviews', which generally include what are normally called 'religions' together with non-religious, organized worldviews such as institutionalized Humanism. The conceptual difference and relationships between personal and institutional worldviews are conceived in this way: personal worldviews may be more or less consciously constructed or coherent, and individuals holding them may explicitly mention an institutional worldview of reference, but not necessarily. Individuals, however, cannot help drawing their ideas from one or many worldviews, consciously or not. Interactions between individuals and groups, traditions and institutions are complex. People are freely and creatively influenced by a whole range of factors, not just by their religion or their adherence to a certain worldview (36).
   Worldviews should be engaged in RE as "complex, diverse and plural" (12) and "dynamic" (72), in the sense that worldviews develop in interaction with each other, with overlapping and cross-fertilization. They are not fixed, bounded entities, but feature both shared characteristics as well as differences. This is because they are fluid, and adapt themselves to new times and cultures, and, as a consequence,

> patterns of belief, expression and belonging may change across and within worldviews, locally, nationally and globally, both historically and in contemporary times. (34)

Worldviews are said to be made up of not only belief and practice, but also of "rituals, narratives, experiences, interactions, social norms, doctrines, artistic expressions and other forms of cultural expression" (72). The distinctive trait (cf. also above, § 2.1.4) is a bundle of "fundamental questions of meaning and purpose" (12). These are shared by both religious and non-religious worldviews, address "the nature of reality, the meaning and purpose of human life, what constitutes a good life" (30), and inform the dimensions of "identity, belonging, commitment, and practice" (30).

The shift from the more specific and theological-oriented "fundamental questions" of the previous documents to these more generic and 'meaning-making'-oriented 'fundamental questions', is noteworthy. What I find missing is a more detailed discussion of what defines a certain worldview as religious or not. Distinction between religious and nonreligious worldviews is stated as "not as clear-cut as we might have thought" (30). The use of the term 'religion' by this document seems to rely on the self-definition of institution and individuals addressed (cf. 73).

Such emphasis on complexity influences the issue of representation, which this document laments as one of the main faults of the past practices of RE. The recommendation is to "move beyond an essentialised presentation of six major world faiths" (6). This means not only ensuring a deeper understanding of the complex and plural nature of those institutional worldviews which "are sometimes neglected" (30) – Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism –, but even suggesting a much broader range including Daoism, Confucianism, Shintō, religions from Australia, New Zeland and America, Zoroastrianism, paganism, modern/new religions such as Baha'i, Jehovah's Witnesses, Rastafari, etc. (cf. 75). There is also a concern towards the 'structural differences' among worldviews, for example, the fact that "different religious or non-religious worldviews may have different components or emphases" (36). That is, some traditions might put more weight on doctrine and orthodoxy while others might prioritize practices or orthopraxis. This is also a critique of past practices of RE which "have sometimes treated all worldviews as though they are predominantly a matter of assent to a series of propositions" (36), or neglected the fact that the same propositions are inevitably interpreted differently according to times, places, cultures and contexts (cf. 34, 37).

This emphasis on theoretical complexities is reflected in the explicit identification of the epistemological underpinning of this RE with a "wide range of academic disciplines" (13) such as

anthropology, area studies, hermeneutics, history, other human and social sciences, philosophy, religious studies and theology. (37)

Affinities with the study of religion\s further increase as we read that the theoretical aims of

> understanding 'religion' as a category, and understanding the nature of worldviews, *are central to the aims of the subject*. Knowledge of particular worldviews alone is not sufficient. (36; italics added)

There is also the invitation for a genealogical study of the concept of religion:

> For older pupils, understanding the origins and uses of the concept 'religion' also helps to illuminate debates in the study of religion\s, for example on the nature of 'Hinduism,' as well as the possible shortcomings of the term. (36)

To be fair, a 'theological-philosophical' approach is not completely dismissed. It is still acknowledged that there are "fertile grounds for investigation" of "revealed truths" claimed by adherents of a particular worldview (73). We interpret this somehow dissonant recommendation as the result of ordinary negotiations among the commissioners and the stakeholders they represent.

This note leads us to the question of didactic transposition, in particular of the external DT and the noosphere. From an institutional and organizational point of view, the recommendations are probably the most innovative. There is a centralizing measure called "National Entitlement to the study of religion\s and worldviews", which is a set of compulsory, organizational principles that must serve as basis for developing programs of study for all state-funded schools (32-3). These principles reflect the above discussions on the concept, representations and epistemology plus the provision for RE teachers to be competent as educators and have a secure and updated subject knowledge. Building on these principles, the Department of Education should appoint, based on the recommendations from the Religious Education Council, a board in charge of the development of a national, non-statutory-program of study (38-9). This board is made up by professionals experts in academic research on Religion and Worldviews, in curriculum development, in teacher education and in actual classroom experience (39).

The non-statutory national programs of study are expected to have much more weight – similar to a national curriculum – than the previous non-statutory frameworks, because of another important recommended reform: the removal of the requirement for local education authorities to develop locally agreed syllabi (41). SACREs and ACs should thus change into "Local Advisory Network for Religion and Worldviews" (cf. 52-7), whose function is to facilitate the imple-

mentation of the National Entitlement, and to provide support and resources. Also, their composition changes, with an increased role of the professionals and practitioners in the school context along with an involvement of academic researchers. Notably, the proposal puts the Church of England at the same level as all the other religious traditions in the composition (cf. 39).

In other words, among the *savoirs* to be didactically transposed, a heavier weight is put on the academic disciplines, as the religious institutions and communities are no more directly involved in the creation of the program of study. This idea is reflected also in the observation concerning the change of the name of the subject:

> The name also removes the ambiguity in the phrase 'Religious Education', which is often wrongly assumed to be about making people more religious. (7)

The general educational perspective of this RE is not limited to providing the cognitive enrichment on the subject matter and introduction to knowledge and methods of various academic disciplines. These latter are also supposed to foster a range both specific and general, transferable skills, more or less intrinsic to these disciplines but with a broad educative application (29). More specific skills include, among others, analyzing primary and secondary sources, understanding symbolic language, using technical terminology, performing qualitative and quantitative research, applying hermeneutical approaches, etc. Wider transferable skills and dispositions include empathy, respectful critique of beliefs and positions, recognizing bias and stereotype, critical thinking, self-reflection, open mindedness and representing others' views with accuracy (29, 77). Even if addressed in a less detailed way, 'existential' educative aspects are not neglected. The transversal dimension of the "spiritual, moral, social and cultural development" policy (Ofsted 2004b, 6) is interpreted as being able to understand the human quest for meaning, being prepared for life in a diverse world, reflecting on one's own worldview as an answer to the "fundamental human questions" (77) and "articulating these responses clearly and cogently while respecting the right of others to differ" (73).

4.3 English RE: Rational-Theological Approach

4.3.1 Introduction

I put the works of two prominent authors in the fields of RE under this label. The first is Andrew Wright, active from the early 1990s till the present day. He is Professor of Religious and Theological Education at the Institute of Education, University College London and presently he coordinates the Critical Religious Education Network which includes Elina Wright from the University of Oxford, Angela Wright from King's College of London, Christina Easton from London School of Economics, and Angela Goodman from UCL Institute of Education. The last and most interesting work for our purposes produced by this network is *Critical Religious Education in Practice* (Easton et al. 2019), but other relevant works by Wright will be also examined.

The other author is L. Philip Barnes, presently Emeritus Reader in Religious and Theological Education at King's College of London. He has edited a collection of the major works for the publisher Routledge about RE (Barnes, Arthur 2016) issued by the *British Journal of Religious Education*.

The reasons why I put these authors together lies in their common focus on the philosophical and rational approach to RE, in the sense that a philosophical theorizing on the nature and aims of RE covers a good part of their research. Furthermore, they both see RE as an educative endeavor aimed at fostering competence for rationally assessing and judging the main doctrinal tenets of the religious traditions. Both of them prefer to call these tenets 'truth-claims' and conceive them accordingly. In their approach such truth-claims are to be critically analyzed and compared one against each other on the base of their rational consistency. This explains the choice of my wording 'rational-theological',[10] which also indicates how 'theology' (in their understanding thereof) is individuated by these authors as a disciplinary resource of reference for RE.

Note that they prefer to label themselves differently, as Wright calls his approach 'Critical Religious Education' and Barnes 'Post-Liberal Religious Education', which leads also to the last common point: they are both highly critical of what they call the 'liberal approach' in RE, which flourished in the 1980s and, according to them,

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[10] While the juxtaposition of 'rational' with 'theological' may sound paradoxical, it will be clearer in the next paragraphs how, through the focus on transcendental issues such as the 'ultimate-state-of-things' and the recourse to arguments of overt philosophical nature, these authors manage to maintain these two dimension in a fairly coherent manner, even if this may lead us to see some postulates typical of religionist insiders behind their works.

upholds a universalistic theological agenda in which all religions are said to share a common truth.

4.3.2   Concept, Representations and Epistemology of Religion

In order to individuate the concept of religion employed by Wright and Barnes, we need first to address their criticism of those RE approaches variously defined in their works as 'experiential-expressive', 'liberal Protestant' or (badly developed) 'phenomenological'.

Wright attributes the pejorative label of 'experiential-expressive' to those RE practices which, according to him, followed from the 1980s onwards a common trend of assuming that there is the same infinite divine reality behind different religious phenomena, whose truth is expressed through inner feelings and emotions, while the different doctrines are 'accidental' (Wright 2000, 32 ff.; cf. also Barnes 2007, 19-20). According to Wright, the strategy behind this approach is aimed at reconciling faith with modern culture and at avoiding conflicts between truth-claims, since it eschews issues such as 'revelation' and 'reason'. He thinks that such inclusive educational models are influenced by the emergence of liberal humanism as the dominant philosophy underlying the public education system, which is particularly concerned with social integration and avoiding controversy.

This approach is deemed highly flawed because it disregards the differences between the various religious traditions in favor of an overly simplistic attitude, nurtured in the 'cult of the individual'. He also laments an unsubstantiated suspicion on language and rationality that leads to the reliance on the authority of the inner experience, eliminating the possibility of criticism. Furthermore, this RE paradigm is considered to be forming in itself a spiritual tradition grounded in a mishmash of romantic and post-modern ideology (cf. also Wright 2004), which encourages pupils to develop their "own personal and idiosyncratic vision of ultimate reality" (Wright 2000, 76).

Barnes holds very similar critiques to this modern RE based on "romantic pluralistic theology" which has uncritically appropriated axioms and commitments of the phenomenology of religion (Barnes, Wright 2006, 69; Barnes 2014, 94-113):

> But why should schools be required to convey the liberal Protestant creed that all religious paths lead to God? Modern Britain is a pluralist society where the truth of religion is disputed and where no single form of religion commands allegiance. (Barnes, Wright 2006, 71)

According to them, religious pluralism cannot be addressed merely by promoting an alleged commonality of all religions, instead, it should

respect the right of religious believers and religious traditions to define themselves and not impose on them the kind of fluid religious identity that follows from liberal theological commitments. (72)

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

Wright, in his main monographs devoted to RE (2000; 2004; 2007), does not directly address the concept of religion, but discusses instead the idea of 'spirituality', in the sense of

the relationship of the individual, within community and tradition, to that which is – or is perceived to be – of ultimate concern, ultimate value and ultimate truth. (Wright 2000, 175)

In this way he intends to put religious traditions on the same level as all those worldviews that affirm a certain order-of-things, such as secularist or post-modern worldviews.[11] At the same time, however, he stresses that

any study of religion\s that does not have at its heart the exploration of the question of transcendence [...] will, from the outset, be a reductive activity to do justice to the heart of religion. (Wright 2004, 212)

Such a focus on 'transcendence' is not seen as problematic when the comparison is also made with perspectives such as secularism, postmodernism or even atheism and agnosticism, because for Wright

the question of religious commitment is universal and unavoidable [...] atheism and agnosticism are just as much acts of faith as positive religious commitment. (Wright 2000, 27)

Concerning religion and religions, in one article he draws on Searle and addresses religious traditions as "robust and substantial social facts" created by a collective intentionality (Wright 2008, 10), which is consistent and homogeneous enough to justify not only the use of tags such as 'Christianity', but also of those ones coined by outsiders such as 'Buddhism' and 'Hinduism' (8). For him it is possible to talk of "fuzzy edges" surrounding a "prototypical nucleus of all religious

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11   The secularist one is said to put truth in natural and social sciences, while the post-modern one negates any objective truth (cf. Easton et al. 2019, 20-1).

traditions" (7-8, 10-11), so that we may find also Christians who believe in reincarnation, but they will be "clearly at odds with the collective intentionality of that tradition as a whole" (10). Concerning the structure and function of religion, he employs the term 'world-views' and attributes four key functions to them:

> They constitute answers to basic or ultimate questions; they tell stories about the ultimate order-of-things; they utilise a range of distinctive cultural symbols; they express themselves in social practices that offer a particular way-of-being-in-the-world. (11)

Turning our attention to Barnes, we find similar arguments. One difference consists in his slightly sharper differentiation between religions and worldviews, since he defines as 'religious' any belief or practice that "expresses or implies the existence of supernatural being or states: angel, ghosts, nirvana, God, Brahaman" (Barnes 2014, 120). More in detail he states that the term 'religion' applies "in the context of belief in a transcendent or supernatural reality that is regarded as unconditionally and non-dependently real", and this belief is

> integrated into a wider form of life that incorporates both other beliefs, say about human origins, personhood and human salvation, and practices that typically involve (religious) functionaries, institutions and rituals. (121)

Barnes, moreover, does acknowledge the possibility of inner variation and creativity within religions, even at the level of individuals (121-3). However, he still attributes strong ontological status to religious traditions. They are "coherent wholes" (212), and this coherence is ultimately derived from a distinctive core made up of beliefs:

> Religions are, at least, schemes of belief; and in certain context are appropriately describe as such. [...] There are key beliefs in each religion. It is these key beliefs and the differences between them that justify distinguishing between the different religions. (210)

He argues for the importance, also in terminological way, of the coherence of key beliefs, by way of a comparison with Marxism and pointing to the incoherence of speaking of a Marxist who believed in a free competitive market (211-12). From this perspective, even if he concedes that boundaries between religions may shift and be contested,

> this does not mean that boundaries are infinitely extendible or contractible. The beliefs of Christianity, established by reference to the Christian scriptures, restrict and constrain Christian identity. (212)

Therefore, words such as 'Christianity', 'Hinduism', etc. can still retain their descriptive function (207 ff.).

Concerning the representations of religions in the Rational-Theological, it should be clear that there is a certain hierarchy, both ontological and epistemological, that puts the intellectual/textual/normative aspects preeminent over material/social/pragmatic aspects (cf. Easton et al. 2019, 40). Beliefs, doctrinal propositions and relative texts are the key aspects to be taken into account when dealing with religions, and it is through the individuation and discernment of these key aspects that it is possible to distinguish different and coherent religious traditions in accord with the paradigm of the world religions: Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism.

Since Wright and Barnes discuss mainly the theoretical foundations of their RE models, they do not give many details on how religion and religions should be represented. An exception is the already cited *Critical Religious Education in Practice* (Easton et al. 2019). Here it is worth noting a proposal for an introductory series of lessons focused on the issues of 'ultimate questions' which imply what I would label a 'Greek-Judeo-Christian' paradigm, especially in respect to question 1, 6 and 9. The questions are the following:

1. Does God exist and if so, what is he/she like? 2. Where did the world come from? 3. Where did human beings come from? 4. What is the purpose of our lives? 5. What happens to us when we die? 6. Do human beings have a soul? What about animals? 7. Why is there evil in the world? 8. Do miracles happen? Do you have any examples? 9. Who was Jesus? 10. Does it matter how we treat other people? Why/why not? (24)

The analysis of these kinds of ultimate questions should lay the groundwork for further developments. Therefore, a strong focus on doctrinal issues or, as the authors put it, 'truth-claims' should not surprise. This is reflected in the next proposal for a scheme of work, which takes Islam as an example of the way to address a world religion. The topics to be explored are: an overview of the life of Prophet Muhammad, with special focus on those contexts that make sense of key teachings of the Prophet. Next, there are the Qur'an and the Hadith, followed by an overview of six key beliefs of Islam: the unicity of Allah, the revelation through prophets, the Qur'an as the word of Allah, the Day of Judgment, the existence of angels and their activity in the world, and the predestination of everything by Allah. Concerning these practices, the Five Pillars are singularly addressed, one in each lesson, with the recommendation of highlighting the connection with beliefs. One lesson is devoted to the difference between Sunni and Shi'a Islam. Finally, the other three topics are proposed

for their particular sensitivity or contemporary relevance: the concept of jihad (greater and lesser), the role/dress, etc. of women, and the Shari'ah law (Easton et al. 2019, cf. 45 ff.).

I think it is safe to judge this representation as quite 'monolithic'. In the detailed overview of the scheme of work (47-67) and in the additional materials proposed,[12] I have not been able to find any hints envisioning the idea of the historical character or historical development of Muslim beliefs or practices.

The same applies for a proposal for a scheme of work on Buddhism and Christianity. Let us address the contents regarding Buddhism (148-50). They propose 24 lessons, of which lessons 1, 2 and 3 focus on the Buddha's life, its significance and the Four Noble Truths. Lesson 4 is meant to understand what the Sangha is and to explore the denominational differences.[13] In Lesson 5, students should address the Buddhist worldview through what is called an 'ontological triangle' of questions such as "what is the nature of ultimate reality?", "what is the view of humanity?", "how should we then live?". Lessons 6 and 7 remain within the doctrinal dimension with the concept of 'Dhamma' (Dharma) and the concept of co-dependent arising. Lessons 8 and 9 address the 'nature of humanity' through the topics of the three marks of existence and the topic of the 'human personality'. This latter is presented as the doctrine of the five aggregates for what concerns the Theravāda tradition, while in reference to Mahāyāna the doctrine of emptiness within the possibility of attaining Buddhahood and Buddhā nature are presented.

Lessons 10 and 11 focus on different ideals in Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions: Arhat and Bodhisattva ideals, Buddhahood and the Pure Land. Lessons 12 and 13 shift to practice by exploring meditation which is differentiated in "Samatha (concentration and tranquility) including mindfulness of breathing", "Vipassana (insight) including zazen" and, "visualisation of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas" (Easton et al. 2019, 149). Lessons 14 and 15 aim at presenting the "puja/devotional ritual" at home and in the temple, including chanting "both as a devotional practice and as an aid to mental concentration" (149), *mantra* recitation and the use of *mālā*. Lessons 16 and 17 focus on Buddhist places of worship including temples, shrines, monasteries. Interestingly enough, different ceremonies and rituals associated with death and mourning are also addressed in lessons 18 and 19. Lessons 20, 21 and 22 engage with ethical teachings: the five moral precepts, the six perfections in the Mahāyāna tradition, *karma*

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12 Available upon purchase from the website: https://routledgetextbooks.com/textbooks/_author/easton/.

13 No further specifications are added but I surmise, on the base of following indications, that with 'denominational differences' just Mahāyāna and Therāvāda distinctions are implied.

and rebirth, compassion and 'loving kindness' (*mettā*) (150). The last two lessons are meant for reflections and feedback.

As we can see, more than a half of the topics regard doctrinal matters. A slightly increased emphasis on variations in practices can be recognized, but a very homogeneous image is still maintained, especially on key doctrines, which are differentiated merely between Therāvāda and Mahāyāna. Again, no hints on the historical character or the historical development of beliefs or of practices are provided. Quite the contrary, to purposely seek a coherence between 'fundamental beliefs' and practices even in front of inconsistencies with the living practice is proposed (cf. Easton et al. 2019, 139).

The insistence on a religions' 'truth-claim' is further reaffirmed in the scheme of work "Critical Religious Education and Philosophy: An Exemplar Scheme of Work for Teaching Science and Religion" (69-101). It consists of a comparison between the scientific methods and theories relevant to ultimate questions, such as the Big Bang theory and evolution, and the biblical myth of genesis and various arguments for the existence of God. The philosophical framework aims at pushing students towards confronting the epistemological coherence of 'science' and 'religion'. Actually, with 'religion' the authors merely intend the philosophical arguments for the existence of a Creator God in Christianity.

We can shade further light on the logic of such an approach in RE if we look at the underlying epistemological approach adopted. Wright constantly reminds (2000, 23-5; 2004, 52-61; Easton et al. 2019, 2), that he adopts an ontological realism in which reality is deemed to exist independently of human perception. Knowledge of this reality is limited but not completely arbitrary, and therefore it is possible, and it can be based on informed and rational judgment. What is peculiar in Wright's take is that:

> The spiritual implications of critical realism are profound, since it suggests that we are not simply free to construct our own personal set of ultimate values, and instead must allow our spiritual identities to be shaped by our developing relationship with an objective reality which is inherently meaningful. (Wright 2000, 25)

This is because:

> The domain of value has as much ontological reality as the realm of fact. [...] It is possible that the explorations of reality conducted by artists, scientists, philosophers and theologians will reveal that values are not mere human constructs, but are rather inherent in the very structure of reality. (24)

In other words, it makes no sense for Wright to talk about insiders or outsiders because religious people, agnostics and atheists are at

the same level in their holding of beliefs/positions about the ultimate-state-of-things. Even scientists

> engage with a variety of meta-narratives that seek to account for the ultimate order-of-things, whether these be religious or secular, realistic or idealistic, modern or post-modern. (Wright 2004, 52)

Consistently to Wright's idea of religions as "answers to basic or ultimate questions", religions are to be epistemologically engaged not as social phenomena about which second-order knowledge (analysis, description, theoretizations, etc.) can be produced and discussed. Instead, they are sources of knowledge about the nature of reality and the way to behave accordingly to such a nature (182-3; 2007, 148; Easton et al. 2019, 2-3). Religious practices are thus the practical embodiment of the fundamental beliefs on this metaphysical reality, which faithful individuals adopt in order to carry on what is called 'truthful living'.

Coherently with this framework, to study religions there is no need to address the questions of definitions or concepts of religion with pupils. Instead, it is proposed to adopt three philosophical-epistemological questions is proposed:

> 'What is real?' (ontological realism); 'Can we know what is real?' (epistemic relativity); and 'How do we know what is real?' (judgmental rationality). (Easton et al. 2019, 19)

Thus, the way of studying a topic, such as e.g. the three marks of existence in Buddhism, is to question their 'truthfulness': "Are the three marks of existence self-evidently true?" (149).

Turning our attention to Barnes, even if we do not find any explicit discussion on the epistemological grounding in his RE proposal, I think it is safe to say that he does not differ too much. To be fair, he does touch the issue of the definition of religion in class *en passant* by stating that, even it is not a strictly necessary topic for religious educators, it may be a useful intellectual activity for pupils, albeit at a level adapted to their age and aptitude (Barnes 2014, 120). There are also some differences from Wright, such as the idea of more starkly separating between religious and non-religious worldviews (120-1). However, this does not mean that pupils should not "need to be familiar both with secular challenges to religion and with religious challenges to secularism" (Barnes 2008, 29). Ultimately, the question of 'truth' and the way to approach the 'truths' expressed by religion is pivotal also in Barnes and expressed in terms similar to Wright. Religions are "contrasting sets of beliefs (which *purport to 'reveal' the same divine being and mediate salvation*)" (italics added), so that

in an important sense religions are in competition with one anoth-
er over the nature of reality (they enshrine and express different
truth-claims). (Barnes 2014, 213)

These set of beliefs, furthermore, are what must be "assessed for
their coherence" (126). In fact,

> What is required in education is for the truth-claims of religion
> (and of particular religions) to be presented to pupils and for *at-*
> *tention to be given to the forms of evidence to which religions ap-*
> *peal and to the kinds of assessment that are relevant to the consid-*
> *eration of this evidence.* (241; italics added)

4.3.3 Didactic Transposition and Educational Perspective

According to what was explored above, it would seem that in Wright's
and Barnes's proposals the main *savoirs* taken as reference are not
scholarly knowledge, but instead, the various doctrines of a religion
taken at face value. In other words, since for Barnes and Wright re-
ligions are fundamentally ways of knowing ultimate reality and pre-
scribing practices (rituals and ethics) that fit coherently with that
said reality, this knowledge is what should be didactically trans-
posed. Indeed, this approach seems coherent with the situation of
the noosphere in which representatives of the locally present reli-
gious are supposed to draft the RE syllabi.

However, we have one striking difference from the didactic trans-
positions of other school subjects, especially those which are actual-
ly a bundle of different academic disciplines, such as socio-economic
sciences or natural sciences. In these cases, different disciplines are
supposed to shed light in a complementary way on a common subject
matter, such as human society or natural environments. Instead, in
Wright's and Barnes's proposal, the various religions are engaged
as contrasting truth-claims in competition over the faithful descrip-
tion of ultimate reality. So, on a closer inspection, the *savoirs* of ref-
erence to be didactically transposed is not the 'religious knowledge',
i.e. knowledge about ultimate reality represented by various reli-
gious traditions. What seems to be the knowledge of reference is
somehow a much more general, non-explicitly-confessional 'religious
knowledge' of which the various religious traditions (secular world-
views included, at least for Wright) may be or not be truthful or co-
herent instances.[14]

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14   Cf. Barnes (2014, 213): "A focus on contrasting sets of beliefs [...] highlights differ-
ences and draws attention to the fact that these may be intractable, *and consequently*
one or other may be true and others false, or perhaps one more true and others less true

Wright does not explicitly define such a general *savoir* of reference, but we can have an idea of the relative 'mindset' typical of this *savoir* (cf. above, § 2.2.3)

> Here religious teaching takes on a spiritual dimension, moving 'beyond an objective study of religion\s to an exploration of inwardness, a grappling with existential questions, a search for spiritual identity, an encounter with mystery and transcendence'. (Wright 2000, 11)

> It follows that our pursuit of knowledge entails a struggle for more authentic forms of life, more appropriate ways of being in the in the world, and more truthful ways of relating to ourselves, to other-in-community, to the natural order-of-things, and to the presence or absence of that which is sacred, transcendent or divine. (Wright 2004, 167)

Barnes, instead, straightforwardly argues in favor of theology as the discipline of reference of RE (Barnes 2018)[15] and his argument goes as follows: under the influence of modernity (urbanization, secularization, individualization), religious identity is a matter of choice among competing options. Therefore, the educational challenge is to equip pupils with the intellectual tools to make informed and rational decisions about their ultimate commitments and values. This situation "clearly draws theology naturally into our discussion" (127) because it is theology that is primarily "concerned with a normative set of beliefs" (118) and that "articulates the rules that govern how doctrines are related to one another and, by extension, how the rules relate to practice" (127-8). Wright too, less explicitly, acknowledges such a role in theology:

> It is vital for students to engage in theological exploration of text, in order to meaningfully explore the different answers each religion offers to the nature of ontological reality. (127)

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in certain respects" (italics added). Cf. also Easton et al. (2019) who, concerning the position of agnosticism, state that "it must be made clear to your students that such a potentially ambivalent position does not change the nature of reality – either God exists or God does not exist. Many theists and secular thinkers would argue that it is worth working out which side you feel has better evidence" (22).

15   To be fair, Barnes concedes that also religious studies should be taken as reference for RE, however he also argues that it was under the influence of religious studies (that is, phenomenology) that British RE ended up endorsing the liberal protestant theological view that wrongly treats all religions as equivalent truths. Moreover, he contends that also religious studies, though they have more inner variety, involve normative commitments, and therefore, should not be absolutely distinguished from theology.

Wrigth and the other authors recommend "producing high calibre philosophical and theological study, rather than reducing our subject to social science" (Easton et al. 2019, VII).

In summary, the fundamental knowledge of reference seems to be a kind of rational and existential inquiry over matters of transcendence, through which the truth-claims of individual religions can be assessed and, consequently, endorsed or not. I venture to label such knowledge 'natural theology', in the sense of a "program of inquiry into the existence and attributes of God without referring or appealing to any divine revelation" (Brent, N/D). Coherently, the methods, the language and the key concepts are those of philosophical investigation: inductive *versus* deductive arguments, verification principle, inference, the relationships between ontology, epistemology and ethics, and so on (cf. Easton et al. 2019, chs 3 and 4). Similarly, from the point of view of the learner (cf. above, § 2.2.5), what are expected to be primarily activated are not cognitive competencies concerned with data on various religions, but the very personal religious or not-religious perspectives of pupils (cf. 141-2). Data and information from various religious traditions are the 'samples' with which exercising such theological competence.

All of this has quite relevant educational implications. It is safe to conclude that, with reference to the two main educational aims of British RE, 'learning about religion' and 'learning from religion', in this RE approach the former is clearly in function of the latter. That is, learning about religion is conductive to directly addressing one's own religious worldview. We can see this in the assessment criteria laid out in Easton et al. (2019, 167-9). The criterion of *attentiveness* refers to the accuracy in which beliefs, practices, concepts and issues are not only explored by the pupils, but also confronted by them with their own worldviews. *Discernment* refers to the ability of pupils to offer balanced and substantiated arguments in their evaluation of both their own as well as that of others' views on ultimate truth. Finally, the criterion of *responsibility* refers to the issue of 'truthful living', i.e. the coherence with which beliefs are held and behavior is adopted (168).

This last criterion shows also how the ethical dimension is pivotal in the overall educational perspective of this RE. In Easton et al. (2019) there is a proposal for a series of lessons with a distinctive focus on ethics, with particular attention to the issue of moral decision making, aimed at equipping pupils with the philosophical tools with which to identify the sources of moral decision-making and to evaluate the consistency, strengths and weaknesses of both religious (called by them 'theistic') and non-religious ethical systems. The same applies to Barnes, who in various occasions laments how RE has been divorced from moral education and strongly suggests reinstating this aspect in the discipline, arguing that religious tra-

ditions are to be engaged as the main sources of ethical guidance (Barnes 2007, 27-8; 2014, 218-32; 2018, 124-30), with special attention to the role of Christian theology in its non-distinction between facts and values (Barnes 2018, 128).

In asking ourselves what may be the social practices of reference for a rational-theological RE approach, on the basis of the previous discussions I would propose two practices. The first practice I individuate is no other than *being a self-conscious religious practitioner*. As Easton et al. say, "nor is it sufficient for students to merely express an unjustified personal preference for one belief system or another" (Easton et al. 2019, 3). However, here a well-precise conception of what it means to be religious is implied, i.e. with a strong intellectual component, focused on propositional beliefs as expressed in authoritative texts, and with the assumption that holding a religious (or non-religious) position fundamentally excludes all the others, otherwise one would result 'incoherent'.

Invites to 'compare', 'argue for' and 'defend' one's own worldview are expressions which are quite reiterated. Together with our conclusion concerning the reference to an implicit 'natural theology', this leads me to hypothesize that Wright and Barnes, consciously or not, have in mind a second social practice of reference,[16] that I would label 'theological debating'. We find a perfect instance of this in the accompanying learning materials for the introductory series of lessons in Easton et al. (2019). Here teachers are invited to organize a 'RE boxing' (*sic*) activity. It starts with an example of a theological debate about the existence of a transcendent God between two hypothetical children, holding respectively a theist and a secularist view. Pupils are asked to enter the debate and discuss which one of three worldviews – theist, secularist or post-modern one – is more convincing.

4.3.4   Evaluation and Criticism

The rational-theological approach is clearly at odds with the SoR-based RE on many levels. From the point of view of a general approach of the study of religion\s, what is quite puzzling is the conception of religions as a cultural-social phenomena coherently bounded and dependent on a well-defined, rationally systematized set of truth-claims. Wright and Barnes rightly criticize certain RE approaches, which interpret religions as being ultimately grounded on a universal dimension of emotional/experiential nature, for actually being a subtle and hegemonic form of Liberal Protestantism. However, their strict characterization of religion under philosophical and theologi-

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16 Even if it would sound, admittedly, somehow 'outdated'.

cal lens does not differ very much. It entails, in fact, a paradigm that I called 'Greek-Judeo-Christian' which is equally hegemonic. This paradigm implies the analysis of the rational coherence and persuasive power of the – written – doctrines of religious traditions on topics such as God, cosmogony, anthropogony, eschatology and morals. In other words, their privileged focus is on theological disputations on certain transcendent matters, which is hardly a neutral position, in that it emphasizes dimensions such as creedal emphasis, scripturalism, universality and distinctiveness. And we have seen how the emphasis on these dimensions emerged out of the historical evolution of Christianity (cf. above, §§ 2.1.5 and 2.1.8).

The logical consequence of this epistemological and educational choice is that religions are automatically transformed into monolithic systems of thought and practice. Internal variations or diversions from this paradigm are uninfluential and even pernicious, because they hinder the simplified representations which a tradition needs to undergo in order to be analyzed as a coherent whole. As can be surmised by the examples of representations of Islam and Buddhism, this approach highly reinforces what we already criticized as the world religions-paradigm (§ 2.1.5). What is automatically eschewed are the social impacts, the historical developments and interaction of religions with the whole spectrum of human thought and behavior. To give one example for all, the issue of the influence of Christianity on our modern concept of religion and on its consequences for other civilizations (cf. §§ 2.1.5, 2.1.8 and 3.3.1) is completely ignored.

The theme of Japanese and other Asian religions further corroborates our SoR-based critique to this approach. We have indeed seen (§ 3.2.2) how it is useless to look for a well-defined and rationally systematized set of orthodox beliefs in these traditions. It is much more common, instead, to find variations, often with contrasting tendencies, on general common themes such as the belief in 'spirits' or the status of *kami vis-à-vis* other traditions of thought and practice. On a larger scale, such as the case of religions of the Indian sub-continent, it is true that scholars have identified some general common themes and assumptions (e.g. rebirth, mechanism of *karma*, authority of the *Veda*, a shared pantheon), but at the end these elements, just like the very word 'Hinduism', are artificially collected and systematized by scholars to make sense of what they have discovered in the field. The examples in § 3.2.2 showed how various assumptions over the status of supra-human realities where all but fixed.

Often, the hermeneutical creativity of certain traditions, such as Japanese *mikkyō* Buddhism, permits a virtually infinite kaleidoscope of images of deities or metaphysical principles, not rarely coming from other traditions. As a matter of fact, while Wright and Barnes may rightly lament that a certain Liberal Protestant rhetoric imposes a fluidity over different religions, in their will to safeguard theo-

logical differences they risk overlooking those phenomena where this fluidity is actually implemented, such as in the case of Japanese *kenmitsu* system. The hermeneutical possibilities in the religious landscapes of Japan and other Asian regions clearly shows how insistence on the principle of abstract rational coherence is at odds with the empirical reality. This applies to religious phenomenon, but also well beyond. As a parenthetic comment, let us recall Barnes' remarks of the incoherence of speaking of a Marxists that believed in a free competitive market (Barnes 2014, 211-12). In response, we may suggest that nothing shows how empirical facts often contradicts the coherence of 'orthodox' doctrine and texts, such as in the case of the Chinese interpretation of Marxism and capitalism. Similarly, referring to the grassroot levels of practice in both Japan and China, we should recall that a single practitioner may resort to different religious resources simultaneously, accordingly to his/her preferred modalities, such as liturgical, immediate-practical, scriptural, and so on, without any problems of 'coherence' (§ 3.2.1.3).

Finally, due to its almost exclusive focus on discussing matters concerning transcendence or the 'truth-of-the-order-of-things', the rational-theological approach runs a serious risk. That is, to ignore religious practices such as those related to this-worldly concerns in contemporary Japan, or such as those connected with spirit beliefs in early Buddhism (§ 3.2.3). Even worse, it also runs the risk of dismissing these diffused aspects of religious tradition, especially those with strong ritual and bodily components, as superstitious degeneration from (supposedly) pure doctrines, replicating the first orientalist interpretations (§ 3.3.2).

Upon these observations, it should also be clear that the general educational frame of this approach diverges seriously from the intercultural framework set above (§§ 2.2.7 and 2.2.8). Furthermore, claims such as those of Wright that worldviews, including non-religious ones, are to be compared in the same exact terms as those which all refer to the issue of ultimate reality, are clearly at odds with a secular (but not secularist) framework, in the sense that they do not consider the existence of a-religious positions, i.e. positions of persons with no interest in discussing transcendent matters.

The fundamental intercultural attitudes of valuing diversity, especially in the sense of approaching different cultures as a resource for creating new meanings and new narratives, contrasts with the idea of nurturing a self-conscious religious (or anti-religious) person who is capable of assessing whether certain beliefs are – using the very words of Barnes (2014, 213) – "more true and others less true in certain respects". While it is claimed that the rational-theological approach aims at preserving differences among religious traditions, it does however apply an hegemonic paradigm which homogeneously interprets religious traditions and practitioners through an

essentialist perspective. What is consciously overlooked is the piv-otal topics of socio-cultural complexities and the fuzziness within religious traditions, between religious traditions, and between reli-gious traditions and other dimension of human thought and behav-ior. This goes against the idea of multi-perspectivity in the sense of getting a nuanced understanding of reality from different points of view and types of sources.

While for intercultural education a person is conceived as con-stantly creating her/his identity from the available pools of cultural resources, the rational-theological approach requires that this pro-cess must be assessed in terms of 'rationality' and 'coherence', which hinders the idea of maintaining an open definition of one's own identi-ty. It is true that this is meant to foster critical and analytical skills by discussing and debating the rational coherence of normative claims in an open dialogue, which would enhance "responsible, self-critical choices about their participation in and attitude towards religious practices" (Barnes 2018, 126). However, this endeavor comes, in my view, at a high cost. That is, the domestication of religious traditions as a univocal, abstract set of doctrinal key points, artificially de-tached from the historical and social reality, especially when asym-metrical power relations are involved.

In fact, by unquestioningly assuming that such a paradigm is the most relevant, this approach does not permit a critical self-analysis of ethnocentric narratives, ignoring what are the historical and cultural reasons why we, modern Europeans, have come to hold the hegemon-ic view that this kind of paradigm is, naturally, the only relevant one, and why also many contemporary people outside Euro-American re-gions have come to think in a similar way. In this regard, it is worth noting that, for Barnes, to acknowledge that names such as Hindu-ism or Buddhism have been coined by outsiders and colonial powers is irrelevant: "Nothing interesting philosophically follows from this" (Barnes 2014, 209). The rationale for this claim, which is rather un-convincing when confronted with the observations above in § 3.3, is that the usefulness or appropriateness of a term is not affected by who invented or employed them:

> The theory of evolution would still be true if it had originated as Nazi propaganda, and its distinctive terminology would still re-tain its explanatory role! (209)

Moreover, this paradigm of religion surely does not foster openness to cultural otherness, because cultural relativism, in the sense that the standards of a given culture cannot be the base through which to judge other cultures, applies here with difficulty. If in this RE ap-proach the 'other' is expected to be different in its doctrinal beliefs, how about those practitioners to whom the doctrinal beliefs on trans-

cendent matters are scarcely meaningful and/or vary consistently in space and time, as we have variously seen in § 3.2?

4.4 English RE: Existential-Instrumental Approach

4.4.1 Introduction

Under this label I regroup two authors, Clive Erricker and Patricia Hannam. The former is a consultant and researcher in the fields of education and religion. Prior to this, he was County Inspector for RE, History and Community Cohesion in Hampshire, and was previously Head of the School of Religion and Theology and Reader in Religion and Education at the University of Chichester. He has been active in the field of RE since the mid-1990's and together with Jackson and Wright is considered one of the most prominent authors in English RE. Here we will analyze the latest version of his RE proposal (Erricker 2010), but reference will also be made to his previous works (Erricker 2000; 2001; 2007) characterized by a certain radical and post-modern approach. Patricia Hannam is presently County Inspector/Adviser for RE, History and Philosophy for the Hampshire County Council. She authored a recent monograph (2019) in the field of RE and she is presently active in the debate, often writing alongside with Biesta, a renowned scholar in the field of education (Biesta, Hannam 2019a; 2019b; 2020).

The reasons for the choice of the term 'existential' will be self-evident while exploring Hannam's proposal. In Erricker's case, he labels his approach 'conceptual', but it should be understood as an evolution from previous, more radical works, in which Erricker argued that RE should give space to the 'little narratives' of children (their personal religious/'spiritual' experiences) to be explored and developed without being subsumed by the 'great narratives', i.e. the orthodoxies of the religious traditions, and sometimes also in contrast to them. While he acknowledges the excessive radicalism of his previous works (Erricker 2010, 79-80), he still considers his previous research on the experience-based, personal – often called 'existential' or 'spiritual' – development of children as relevant, underpinning his 2010 work also (71-7).

The second reason why I put these two authors together also explains my choice of the term 'instrumental'. Given the strong interest, in both authors, for what RE may and can matter for the personal, existential, 'spiritual' development of the pupils, we will see that – especially in Hannam – the way of treating religion\s (representation, ways in which pupils should study, etc.) is subordinated, i.e. instrumental, to the broader educational goal of the personal, 'inner' de-

velopment of the pupils. In other words, in their RE proposals, religion seems less an *object* and more a *project*.

The last reason for discussing these two authors together lies in the fact that, as a proof of the convergence of their perspectives, they have cooperated in the redaction of the 2011 RE Syllabus for the Counties of Hampshire, Portsmouth and Southampton, called *Living Difference*. The 2016 version, *Living Difference III*, draws heavily from Hannam's perspective – she is one of the authors –, but still retains the methodology of Erricker.

4.4.2 Concept, Representations and Epistemology of Religion

Erricker's monograph does not offer an explicit theory of religion underpinning his approach. However, we may discern some information from the very methodology of his approach. He calls it a 'conceptual approach' because it is fundamentally based on three classes of concepts that the pupils are expected to study in a progressive manner, starting from the type A concepts to type B, and finally to type C. Type A concepts pertain to a generic realm of human experience (common to both religious and non-religious experience) and are devised in order to permit the children to easily and personally relate to. Some examples are 'suffering', 'loyalty', 'belief', 'hope', 'devotion', 'community', 'sacrifice', 'environmentalism', 'love', 'justice', 'power' or 'authority' (Erricker 2010, 91, 112). Type B concepts are said to be "common to many religions" and are "used in the study of religion" (113). Examples are: 'God', 'worship', 'ritual', 'myth', 'martyrdom', 'symbolism', 'sacred', 'holy', 'initiation', 'rites of passage', 'stewardship', 'covenant'[17] (112). Type C concepts are instead those that are peculiar to discrete religious traditions. I will discuss some examples of them shortly, but for now we need to note that these type C concepts are presented as the basis through which "a particular tradition makes sense of the world" (91), as those concepts that different branches within the tradition interpret in various ways, and as being "the why behind the what of practice and behaviour. Thus, resurrection is a key concept in Christianity but prayer is not. Torah is a key concept in Judaism but Passover is not" (92).

For Erricker, the best way to conceive religions (as well as non-religious worldviews such as humanism) is to treat them as 'conceptual worldviews', in the sense of being made up of a web of peculiar concepts (type C ones), which can be nonetheless connected with generic concepts of human existence (type A) and concepts common to many

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[17]   For now, I limit myself to note that the choice of some of these type B concepts, especially 'God', 'covenant', 'stewardship' and 'covenant' seems too tailored on Abrahamic religions.

religions, used in the study of religion\s (type B). The function of this kind of conceptual worldviews is twofold: it is an interpretative tool to make sense of the world, and at the same time it exerts an impact on the world. Moreover, these worldviews are subject to interpretation by branches within traditions, as well as contextualization in various historical and social circumstances (cf. 122, 139, 141 and 171).

Before addressing Erricker's epistemological underpinnings, i.e. his take on "how religion should be studied", we need first to consider the fact Erricker's position is highly influenced by the post-modern critique. We may thus ask whether 1) he is implicitly putting forth a definition, a theory, a way of representing and studying religion; or 2) he is presenting instead a *progressive didactical narrative* that serves for the educational aims of his idea of RE, without bothering too much in terms of coherence with a (supposed) external reference.

In the first case, his theoretical approach to the question of 'what is religion' seems to conceive, and represent religions, as possessing a seemingly a-historical, conceptual nucleus of fixed key ideas, from which practices and other beliefs would stem, as well as different interpretation of said ideas. Such an interpretation also entails, for example, that not only for the external observer, but also for the insider/practitioner, what is actually valuable and pivotal are abstract concepts, while rituals or behaviors have a derivative nature.

In the second case, instead, it would be consistent with his general philosophical approach, which is strongly connoted by a constructivist view, coupled with a post-modern critique to the 'grand narratives' and a Foucauldian critique of authority (cf. also Alberts 2007, 179-86 for an overview of his earlier works). We may substantiate this second hypothesis by referring to previous works in which he is critical and suspicious of any great narrative, from both religious traditions and academic disciplines:

> What is judged as idiosyncrasy [...] is the same process of willed and selective remembering that results in orthodoxy in religious traditions. In both cases, the story is told backwards. Tradition and identity are selective constructions of the past that are made in the present. Disciplines such as history and the study of religion\s follow the same procedures and change their conceptual understandings of themselves according to the cultural changes within which they exist. (Erricker 2001, 29)

With this background, his earlier work featured a highly child-centered RE approach in which pupils should be helped to develop their own 'small narratives', instead of perpetuating the grand narratives of both religious orthodoxies and academic disciplines. As a matter of fact, also in the work here under examination, Erricker criticizes other RE approaches for being too narrowly focused on how religions

should be best represented, while overlooking the educational value of RE (Erricker 2010, 63-8). Therefore, we may well assume that, from his perspective, proposing a theory of religion (or a grand narrative on it) and a way of studying it would not make much sense for him – this does not mean, however, that his approach does not implicitly put forth a certain idea of what religion is or even *should be* (cf. next section).

In fact, what it is pivotal for Erricker is the question of how religions should be engaged by pupils in schools in order to fulfills those educational aims that should inform RE (cf. next section). This is evident from its methodology for actually teaching religions in class. He proposes cyclic structures of learning made up by five steps, each one corresponding to a certain skill. The skills, from the most basic to the most advanced, are *communicating*, *applying*, *enquiring*, *contextualizing*, *evaluating*. Since the skill of evaluating is the highest, each cycle should have some overarching key evaluative questions which should be progressively reached by each step. The three class of concepts (type A, B and C) discussed above are the 'material' to be engaged in these cycles, which may have two different starting points.

The starting point is usually the *communicate* and *apply* steps, especially in the case that some preliminary work is needed. Pupils start working on a certain concept from their own experience (hence the relevance of type A concepts) and then build on them. They are asked to express their personal experiences and apply them to certain contexts. For example, if the focus of a series of lessons is the type B concept of the 'sacred', *communicate* and *apply* phase starts with the discussion of what is 'sacred' for the pupils. In the next *enquiry* phase, there is the direct encounter with a religious concept or tradition. Erricker takes the example of the C concept of Tōrāh as the 'sacred' book in the Jewish tradition. Possible differences between a pupils' understanding of sacredness and those of the Jewish tradition need also to be outlined. The next, the *contextualize* step consists of basically adding nuances and further details by providing a certain context. For example, the different approaches to the Tōrāh by Orthodox, Ultra-orthodox or Reformers. This *contextualize* phase should also raise issues relevant to both the upcoming *evaluate* step and the overarching evaluate questions. The latter consists in gauging the value of a certain concept and in providing explanation for it. It is divided into two sub-steps. The first is *evaluate within*, i.e. within the context of a certain religious tradition, and the example of an evaluative question is "to what extent and why is the Tōrāh sacred for Jews?" (Erricker 2010, 85). The second is *evaluate without*, outside any particular context and addressing the type B concept of sacred in a more general dimension. For example, asking "to what extent is sacredness important today?" (85).

A RE based on this methodology is meant to be a path towards "religious literacy", "worldview interpretation" and "worldview analysis". With "religious literacy" Erricker means to go beyond the literal-

ist meaning of a certain word/sign and explore multiple/symbolic (he says "figurative") significations. For example, it entails understanding the web of meanings and possible articulations of the type B concept of the *sacred* just described above (122-9). "Worldview interpretation" means to understand the above process in the context of a specific worldview. This involves the identification and understanding of the connections between the various type C concepts, their different interpretations within the tradition, and the specificity of the said worldview as a peculiar interpretation of the general human experience expressed by the various type A concepts (143-4). "Worldview analysis" is a further step and implies the study of

> how worldviews impact on us due to the differing interpretations of concepts and how they are contextualised in world events and changes over time, and the complexity that involves. (171)

How does Erricker's approach influences the representation of religions, and in particular East-Asian ones? Let us begin by addressing Erricker's choice of type C concepts. First, we note that by individuating *emic conceptual elements as the key aspect*, this automatically translates in representations that highly foreground the intellectual dimension, at the expenses of other dimensions. Type C concepts of Hinduism (in his romanization) are: *brahman, avatar, atman, brahmin, Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, murti, darshan, samsara, maya, guna, moksha, yoga*,[18] *bhakti yoga, jnana yoga, karma yoga, karma, Vedas, dharma, varna, jati, ahimsa* (115-16). A nearly total preference toward textual, doctrinal and soteriological aspects, including also quite technical philosophical elements such as the concept of *guṇa* is clear.[19] Similar observations apply to Buddhism's key concepts, which are (in Erricker's romanization): *dukkha, tanha, anicca, anatta, nirvana* (*nibbana*), *karma* (*kamma*), *buddha, sangha, dharma, bhavana, karuna, prajna, sila, upaya* (115).

   Further details can be obtained from some of his proposals for the cycles of learning. Let us start with a cycle related to "worldview interpretation" with Buddhism as its object. The focus chosen is *bhavana* which Erricker understands as

> mental culture or mental development/discipline; also, meditation/formal training; the seventh and eighth steps on the eightfold path. (115)

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18   *Yoga* here does not refer to one of the six orthodox *darśana*, nor to the heterogeneous bundle of psycho-physical techniques of Indian origin, but in the sense of path of liberation as expounded in the *Bhagavadgītā* (a specification not provided here by Erricker) and therefore linked to the three following concepts.

19   Which, it should be noted, pertains to a well distinct philosophical system, the *sāṃkhya* (a specification not provided by Erricker).

In the proposed cycle he sticks with "mental culture of development" (156). The overarching evaluative questions are: "What is the value of bhavana to Buddhists (Evaluate Within)?"; "Is bhavana useful to us, outside a Buddhist context, in our own lives (Evaluate Without)?" (159). The *communicate* and *apply* phase starts with the general idea of greetings, its common understanding by the pupils and its various meanings in different contexts, for example the case of military greetings. The *enquire* phase starts from the phrase "when bowing dies, Zen (or Buddhism) dies"[20] and the pupils are asked to experience the practice of bowing three times in silence and without shoes. The point is to show how this has created a "calm atmosphere and made them feel peaceful, relaxed and focused" (156), connecting with the next exercise which is an actual session of meditation. Here attention is given to the way posture affects the mind and

> to the importance of observation or awareness and the idea of being mindful. The fact that everything changes all the time, nothing abides, not even in the mind, can be introduced and the idea that we are not our thoughts. (157)

In the *contextualize* phase the topic of *bhāvacakra* is introduced to link Erricker's *bhavana* with further doctrinal points such as *saṃsāra*, *nirvāṇa*, the three poisons, ignorance, greed and adversion and the six realms. Interesting enough, pupils are asked to relate their own psychological experience with those represented by the six realms (e.g. toothache or heartache with the hell realm). In the *evaluation* phase the two overarching questions should be addressed, and further articulated in other questions such as: "What self is there to develop if we are not our thoughts and the self is an illusion (the Buddhist concept of anatta – no self)?" (158). It is evident that Erricker not only focuses on abstract doctrinal and intellectual matters, but also focus on those elements which can be easily connected – or even applied, such as in the case of meditation – with the personal and inner-world of the pupils. We will see in the next section how Erricker's methodology and relative representations of religions draw their logic from his larger educational perspective.

Before doing that, we need to address our second author, Hannam. She discusses three different ways to conceptualize religion: the first is religion as *propositional beliefs*, in the sense that being religious means to have certain beliefs, to consider them 'Truth' or 'real knowledge' and consider them as the primary reference points for the self-understanding of one's own religion (Hannam 2019, 88-92).

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20   It is allegedly attributed to the famous Sōtō Zen popularizer in US, Suzuki Shunryū (1904-1971).

A religious education based on such conceptualization may, on one side, risk ending as an indoctrination. On the other, may become a too "scientific, objective, distanced" study (Biesta, Hannam 2019a, 181), which is equally unwanted.

The second way to conceptualize religion is as *practice*, in the sense that a religion is fundamentally a set of practices embedded in one person's life, in accord to a rule deemed authoritative. The main example of this conceptualization would be the Orthodox Judaism, in which carrying out a religious life means adherence/familiarity to a large set of precepts without a strict need to hold on to propositional beliefs (Hannam 2019, 92-5). This approach too may imply unwanted consequences. If religion as belief runs the risk of indoctrination, religion as practice runs the risk of 'recruitment'.

The third way to conceptualize religion is through an *existential* perspective. Since she contends that this is the best way to approach RE, we need to delve into some details. In this conceptualization, the center is 'faith', which needs to be understood as 'trust' (95-9). Hannam articulate her ideas by drawing extensively from authors such as Simone Weil, Thomas Merton[21] and Søren Kierkegaard. For Weil, Hannam tells us, being religious is to be focused on 'faith', but in the sense of a "subject growing in attentiveness to their existence in the world" and not to a truth "external to the believer" (98). Since Weil conceives God as immanent in this world, such existential 'faith' is to be understood as an awareness that 'goodness' is not beyond human reach, but is knowable as one explores it (97). Furthermore, following Merton, "once this way of 'seeing' has taken place, appearances will never be the same and further all action following will be different" (99). Therefore, existential faith is "rooted in the lived life of the individual subject" (96). Kierkegaard is cited to further strengthen the link between such 'faith' and the construction of the subjectivity of the individual, since his famous 'leap of faith' is a matter of an exclusively subjective personal choice, without the support of any objective proof (99-101). Hannam goes on with various examples and quotes. In summary, my understanding of Hannam's existential way of being a religion is a kind of attitude towards a divine plane which is not totally transcendent and capturable in a statement of beliefs or set of practices, but which is possible to know and engage through experientially (i.e. not necessarily in verbal-rational ways) living through the manifestations of such divine plane, which often correspond to the immanent world itself. Such processes involve the development of the identity and subjectivity of the 'existential practitioners'. In less lofty terms, this existential way of being religious is also described as:

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21 Thomas Merton (1915-1968) was an American Trappist monk, renowned for his interest and numerous books in which he explores interfaith dialogue, especially between Catholicism and East-Asian traditions from the perspective of mysticism.

> A way of living one's life or, more accurately, of trying to live one's life. What characterises the religious way of trying to lead one's life, to put it briefly, is that one tries to lead one's life with the possibility of the 'event' of transcendence. This means acknowledging that you are not alone, that you are not in the centre of the universe; it means realising that ultimately everything is given, and that nothing can be kept. (Biesta, Hannam 2019a, 181)

In her main monograph she does not dwell in detailed representations. She affirms that "the way a religious life is lived is most likely to be in some way informed by two or more ways of conceptualising religion" (101). However, referring to Buddhism, Hinduism or Jainism, although she notes that "in some places and for some particular manifestations of these traditions faith as propositional belief could have priority" (102), she nonetheless argues that the "best entry point into Buddhism for example may well be through an existential conceptualization of religion" (102), which is "particularly close to what it means to live a religious life in the Dharmic traditions" (87).[22]

The results of this take on Asian religions can be seen in their representations found in the Syllabus of Hampshire, Portsmouth Southampton and Isle of Wight Councils entitled *Living Difference III* (Hampshire, Portsmouth Southampton & Isle of Wight Councils 2016). We should also keep in mind that this syllabus retains the conceptual approach of Erricker. In the syllabus' indications on how to study Buddhism it is suggested to start from the overarching evaluative question: "*Can meditation help people overcome suffering?*" (49; italics in the original). There are three key concepts to focus on. The first is *dhukka*, which should lead to the discussion of the famous 'four sights' cited in the biography of the historical Buddha, then of the historical Buddha's enlightenment, and finally of the Four Noble Truths. The second is *sangha*, which should lead to the discussion of the first sermon of the eightfold path of the five precepts and of "the different groups within Buddhism". The third one is "enlightenment",[23] which should lead to a discussion of the practice of meditation, how it brings enlightenment and of the importance of different types of meditation to different groups of Buddhists. Further indications suggest contextualizing these aspects in specific examples such as the story of Kisā Gotamī or the practices in some contemporary monasteries to help former soldiers "recovering from post-traumatic stress disorder" (49). Similar to Erricker's approach, also this kind of rep-

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22   Similarly, we note that she focus on Christianity when discussing religion as belief, and on Judaism and Islam when discussing religion as practices.

23   I note here that the syllabus' list of key concepts for Buddhism, differently from Erricker (2010, 115), adds also 'enlightenment' (Hampshire, Portsmouth Southampton & Isle of Wight Councils 2016, 69).

resentations highlights those doctrinal elements which may have a sort of 'direct' relevance to the existential dimension of pupils. Concerning Hinduism, the focus slightly shifts to a more philosophical/metaphysical tone. The overarching question is: "*Does an awareness of **ultimate reality** matter when deciding how to live and act in one's life?*" (51; italics and bold characters in original). The three key concepts are *brahman*, *karma* and *dharma*. While there are not detailed indications concerning the last two concepts, the topic of *brahman* is expected to lead to an exploration of the three deities Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, and their associated ideas of creation, preservation and destruction of the cosmos. It is suggested furthermore to engage these concepts within a context of environmental issues as well as contemporary astronomy (51).

For what concerns the question of "how pupils should study religions", we have already anticipated that for Hannam pupils should engage religion from an existential point of view. To understand Hannam's position better, however, we need to clarify her broader educational perspective.

4.4.3   Educational Perspective and Didactic Transposition

Starting with Erricker, his general view about RE is that it is about how "we make sense of the world and our place in it" (Erricker 2010, 76) and about "interpret[ing] religion in relation to one's own and others' experiences" (82). RE should focus on the personal narratives of the individuals, the construction of meaning that arise from experience, and how these narratives relate to those of others. This is, in his view, the ideal 'merging' of the two RE attainment targets of 'learning about' and 'learning from'. He laments the predominance of the former and the lack of didactic methodology. Instead, RE should seek balance between a cognitive engagement ('about religion') and an affective engagement ('from religion'). We may interpret the five skills above discussed as addressing these two dimensions: *enquire* and *contextualize* pertaining to the cognitive side of 'learning about', while *communicate, apply* and *evaluate* involve more personal and subjective reflections.

This emphasis on affective engagement is not justified by the fact that "effective learning involves young people speaking their mind" (72), but has to be read in light of Erricker's strong constructivism and post-modern critiques that underpin his previous works. According to his criticism, since all content-focused school subjects are power-driven meta-narratives, the only 'authentic' knowledge is knowledge that children construct for themselves from their experience. And this 'knowledge' (uniting both cognitive and affective dimensions) is expected to feed into what Erricker defines as either 'spirit-

uality' or 'narratives', something akin to the construction of an integrated and meaningful view of one's own life. RE thus should "help students develop personally and spiritually" (76) through responses, stimuli, inspirations, criticisms, etc. between children's spiritualities/narratives and other narratives, which include both the great traditions' worldviews incapsulated in the type C concepts and other children's narratives. It is worth noting that Erricker worked on a previous project called "Children and Worldviews", explicitly aimed at individuating what is needed in order to "address children's spirituality and their 'spiritual development' or personal development meaningfully" (76; cf. 72 ff.).

In other words, it is safe to say that Erricker has a strong 'instrumental' understanding of RE, in the sense that:

> The focus on religion is contextual rather than essential. Put another way, educational development is not essentially dependent upon the subject content, rather the subject is a vehicle used for the larger educational development of the learner. (Erricker 2010, 82)

Erricker offers various examples of cycles of learning, addressing various topics. In many of them, this focus of the "larger educational development of the learner" is discernible, in the form of providing 'tools' or 'languages' for the 'spiritual' or existential needs of the pupils. For example, a cycle of learning on Hinduism has this key evaluative question: "How effective is the concept of samsara as an explanation of change?" (102). It starts with the *communicate* and *apply* phase focused on the general idea of change, then the *enquire* and *contextualize* steps address the concept of *saṃsāra* through some verses taken from an Upaniṣad[24] and the image of Śiva *naṭarāja*, this latter offered as an exemplification of such concept. In the final *evaluation* step, the 'spiritual'/existential perspective takes over. A response from a pupil is quoted:

> For me, Shiva Nataraj is a symbol to show that my life is always changing. If I try to stop it changing, I will fail. You cannot stop change. This is difficult sometimes because you don't want things to change. Maybe we were worried about going to a new school. We don't want to grow older. We don't want to leave our family. We don't want to die. But we will, and we have to accept it. We will die, but Shiva Nataraj reminds me that I will be born again. I believe in reincarnation – that I will return and be born again. Everything changes, nothing remains the same. That is what life is like. (104)

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[24] He does not indicate which Upaniṣad and from which translation, but I have been able to identify it as Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 5, 11-13; cf. the unreferenced translation in Erricker 2010, 103 with that of Olivelle 1998, 429.

Apart from these more 'spiritual'/existential aspects of the "larger educational development of the learner", in Erricker we also find an interesting discussion of RE's educational aims within a secular, liberal context. His argument (cf. 177-81) highlights the dilemma inherent in liberalism in which private, different, exclusivist truths exist along with public and pragmatic values, such as pluralism, i.e. the renunciation of an exclusivist truth. These latter must have precedence, thus configuring a liberal yet not universal position. In fact, not every way of life, religious or not, conforms to those values. In other words, liberal pluralism, while trying to accommodate ways of life different from itself, cannot renounce certain principles (which are not empirically universal), such as human rights and democratic process. That RE is perceived as a sensible and contested subject, argues Erricker, is also because such dilemma is much more evident. This brings another dilemma: should RE be the arena for attestation or contestation of religious truths, values and practices? Or should it contribute to cohesion by promoting toleration and respect of diversity? Erricker proposes a 'third way', in the sense that RE should foster a *modus vivendi*, an ongoing project that tries to reconcile intimations of rival traditions, without claiming to any universal authority. Going beyond mere and pleasant celebration of diversity and operating also at the level of discomfort, it should help pupils to determine their value position and foster more durable social cohesion

Notwithstanding this agreeable self-reflective position, I also observe that Erricker cannot escape from an instrumental use of the religious materials that actually hints to certain value frames. In his proposal for a 'worldviews analysis' to be performed by pupils, he set an analytic grid with two axes. The first axis is *religious-secular*,[25] the second is *faith-ideology*. This is meant to highlight the complexity within a single religion in which sub-movements could be found in different positions, e.g. evangelical Christian right and liberation theology (cf. 192-3). However, there is critical issue at this point: for Erricker RE should address both positive and negative aspect of religion or any other non-religious worldview, but he seems to identify the former with 'faith' and the latter with 'ideology':

> It is about faith, in its larger than religious sense, and specific values that liberate us from ideologies, whether religious or not, including scientism, which are repressive and exclusivist. […] It is religion focused on faith and social justice. It is not religion as ideology. If we are to analyse worldviews we must take account of both the way they oppose power and the way they use it. (173)

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25 Readers are given no parameters on which to gauge the level of religiousness of a worldview.

We find additional details in his earlier writings where he defines 'faith' as "willed commitment to a non-institutionalized entity or being" (Erricker 2001, 31). 'Faith', for him, is something that:

> Can only be understood within the matter of relationships, wholly immanent, not as the pursuit of some salvific goal. Given the above reconstruction of the idea of faith we might describe it as an antidote to despair, which brings it closer to our sense of hope. (Erricker 2007, 58)

One of the aims of RE, in fact, is this:

> The facilitation of the metaphorical construction of children for providing meaning, or being the basis of a notion of faith, without resorting to a modernist construct of truth; and the possibility of collapsing the division of religious and secular, constructed on the basis of doctrines that are antithetical to one another, in favour of metaphorical narratives that are always provisional. (Erricker 2000, 66)

In other words, it seems that this 'faith' is both a descriptive and normative concept. It refers to an intuitive, experiential sense of how one can integrate meaningfully different elements of personal life into a thoroughly personal, 'spiritual' manner. RE is in charge of the development in pupils of such a 'faith', which is processual and always provisional, and has to be constructed through interaction with other personal narratives, religious or non-religious sources, all having that same authority.

In Erricker (2010) we find something similar: a value-laded differentiation between a 'liberating' and 'faith-oriented' doctrinal position, and a 'repressing' or 'ideology-oriented doctrinal position'. For example, the case of Pelagianism is brought forth when discussing the exercise of critical worldview analysis:

> When Romanised Christianity entered Britain with the Roman invasion, having already affirmed the doctrines of the Trinity and Grace, it met with a Celtic Christianity informed by the theology of Pelagius, which it ultimately defeated. [...]
>
> It could be argued that the vision of *Pelagianism was much stronger on the liberatory possibilities* of Christian teachings, in this life, than the Romanised form, which stressed sin and salvation in the afterlife, by way of judgement. We now have an orthodoxy of Trinitarianism in Christianity that is largely undisputed. Do we ignore the means by which it came to this undisputed representation or *uncover its doctrinal fault lines* and ask new questions about its veracity? (Erricker 2010, 176; italics added)

Here RE does not limit itself to record different theological positions and possibly interpret them from an ethical or political point of view. Erricker's RE seems upholding certain doctrine at the expense of others because of their 'liberatory possibilities', and this resonates with the post-modern critique that informs much of Erricker's position and his active intent of offering a RE that fosters a freer 'spirituality' or 'faith' in pupils.

Shifting our attention to Hannam, in her case the idea of religions as the *project* of RE, instead of the *object*, is even more conspicuous. However, we need first to address her larger educational perspective. RE "should be *educational*", and "the educational interest is first and foremost *existential*" (Biesta, Hannam 2019, 176; italics in the original), in the sense of allowing pupils to *act* as subjects of their own life, and to be acted upon by external pushes.

She develops these ideas drawing from Hannah Arendt's philosophy (Hannam 2019, 76-86; Biesta, Hannam 2019a, 177-80). According to the philosopher, human *action* means appearing to other human beings as unique individuals, and this appearing marks their own 'beginning' – in Arent's term, 'natality'. Human beings continuously bring new beginnings into the world through their words and deeds. The human being is a subject in a twofold sense, as both who begins an action, and who is subjected to the unpredictable consequence of said action derived from the response of other human beings. This situation may be frustrating, but at the same time such uncontrollability of human action is the very condition for the unique 'natality' of each person to take place. In this sense, for Arendt action is radically situated in plurality, as it requires the exposure to other individuals. In other words, human freedom to action needs a public sphere of difference. In more pedagogical terms, this means that the task of education is:

> To bring the child to this place, the world, where, whilst gathering itself, it meets others who are gathering themselves as well, and where slowly the child comes to the realisation that a 'full gathering' towards pure identity, if such an expression makes sense, is impossible – or is only possible at the cost of obstructing the 'gathering' of everyone else. (Biesta, Hannam 2019a, 179-80)

Now, the pivotal point in Hannam's arguments is that such a way of conceptualizing the existence in the world is comparable to the existential understanding of being religious. In fact, she understands this modality of being religious in terms of a focus on the unique, lived individual experience of the subject projected towards this world. This kind of being religious is a matter of

'standing out' towards the world, exposing oneself to the world, letting the world speak and, more importantly, letting oneself be addressed by the world. (182)

Therefore, such religious life is the expression *par excellence* of political life, in the sense of living with other equals, but at the same time unique, human beings. In fact, such exposition to the world and to others' 'natalities/beginnings' is said to resemble a kind of 'revelation', which calls for a response engagement to a "common world in which there is an opportunity for everyone to begin" (183).

In other words, "existential religious education will be best understood as the cultivation in the child of a mode of being in the world" (Hannam 2019, 131). For this reason, RE should address religious traditions in such a way that it introduces "children and young people '*to what a religious way of looking at and existing in the world may offer in leading one's life, individually and collectively*'" (141; italics added highlight a quote from Hampshire, Portsmouth Southampton & Isle of Wight Councils 2016, 4).

In more practical/didactical terms, this approach to RE indicates three steps which are to be reached by pupils: 'attention', 'intellectual humility' and 'discernment' (cf. Hannam 2019, 124-34), which not only are explicitly drawn from Weil, but are also defined as possible exemplifications of the existential religious path.[26] The first step means bringing the pupil to "attend not only to something but [...] also [...] to someone new" (125), outside the immediate family/familiarity and ordinary flow of his/her life, thus making the engagement with the public sphere possible. The second step means to explore further what s/he is 'attending to', but "without prejudgment" (132). The final step means ensuring that the child's enquiry reaches some kind of resolution about the importance of something and/or the discovery of some values in what has been explored (133).

In conclusion, we can see how in Erricker and Hannam the broader educational framework highly influences the way in which religions should be engaged and studied. That is, representation and conceptualization of religion are clearly subordinated to the set educational goals. Here, in my view, we can see the influence of the – ambiguous and freely interpretable – attainment goal of 'learning from religion'. For both authors, religions are not meant only to be studied in a detached way, but are first of all expected to be personally and existentially engaged by pupils, so that they may tap them as potential sources of meaning for their religious/'spiritual'/existential needs. Therefore, religions must be represented in a suitable way for pupils

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26   "We might even say that this threefold path *is* the path of religious existence itself, constantly attending to other and self, and, with intellectual humility, coming to discernment" (Biesta, Hannam 2019a, 184).

to do that. Erricker offers a systematization of religious contents in three classes of concepts that links everyday experiences together, ideas deemed common to all religions, and different religious traditions. Also his didactical device of the five-fold cycle strongly emphasizes the personal involvement so to ideally foster a 'faith' which is anti-ideological and liberatory. In Hannam's case we find the more explicit statement that religious education should engage religion in existential terms because this is the way of addressing religions best conductive to the desirable educational result, that is leading an active life in the public sphere as theorized by Arendt.

What we are left to do is to observe Erricker's and Hannam's proposals from the point of view of didactic transposition and see which kind of *savoirs savants* are taken into consideration. Starting with Erricker, he considers RE to be deriving from religious studies, but in his understanding these latter include a very broad multidisciplinary approach: "sociological, phenomenological, philosophical, psychological, ethical and theological" (Erricker 2010, 95). Secondly, we must again keep in mind his 'post-modern/instrumental' baseline approach. In other words, what is important is the *performance* (i.e. the educational process and results) of a theory, rather than its adherence to a reality. Indeed, in the various examples of cycles of learning, the suggested epistemological approaches (existential-philosophical, theological, socio-anthropological) are *not* evenly applied to the various religious tradition. The theological approach is the most suggested for examples on Christianity (cf. 105-6, 145-9, 160-2); the socio-anthropological one for Islam and Judaism (cf. 125-7; 149-55, 162-4); the experiential-philosophical one for Hinduism and Buddhism (cf. 102-5, 155-9).[27] I interpret this move as a further instrumental use of religious materials, in order to have the pupils better engage these three aspects. Here we have two interpretative options: in the first case Erricker thinks that pupils expect certain aspects to appear more conspicuously in certain religion and not in others. A sort of instrumental use of stereotypes, so to speak. In the second case, Erricker actually thinks that certain religions do in fact feature more of certain aspects than others, which is more problematic.

At any rate, we are safe to conclude that in Erricker's work the *savoirs savants* of reference are a very heterogeneous array of perspectives whose common point is merely the declared object of study. Indeed, the adoption of so-called theological or experiential-philosophical perspectives seems particularly apt to offer an introduction

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27   Incidentally, we may note how this pairing of Christianity with theology, Judaism and Islam with socio-anthropology and Hinduism and Buddhism with existential philosophy resembles the examples used by Hannam in her discussion on the three ways of being religious: as holding propositional belief (Christianity), as practices (Judaism and Islam), and as existential (dharmic traditions).

to an insider-like appreciation of doctrines, instead of fostering second-order reflections. All these various perspectives, moreover, are generally subordinated to the overall educational objective of providing pupils with resources for developing their own religious or spiritual 'narratives' – that is their own worldviews at various levels, from metaphysical to political, from social to psychological –, thus being able to respond to the religious or spiritual 'narratives' of others and of the established traditions.

Turning our attention to Hannam, we note the following points. First, her preference for the existential approach in RE runs parallel with a skepticism towards a content/knowledge-based education (cf. also Biesta, Hannam 2019b, 6-7). Since human action, in Arendt's view, is guided by volition and desire as much as it is from knowledge and reasoning (cf. Hannam 2019, 76 ff.), "education focussed on knowledge and reasoning is unlikely to be able to address sufficiently well matters in relation to the question 'what does it mean to be religious?'" (76). Accordingly, in her view the very act of conceptualizing religion as an object is a problem:

> The problem [...] however, is that it makes religion into an object of study and thus disconnects religious education from the 'lived experience' of being religious. (Biesta, Hannam 2019a, 175)

In other words, it seems that the *savoirs* of reference for RE cannot but be the very religions themselves, with the caveat of being interpreted from an existential point of view to avoid the risk of both confessionalism and indoctrination (cf. above). In order to do this, no other *savoirs savants* dealing with religion can be of support, due to their objectifying tendency, except from philosophy (or better to say, a certain strands of philosophy) and theology, as the only disciplines that may bring the inquiring subject to the required existential involvement. We have seen how Hannam largely draws from Weil, Kierkegaard and Merton, and this privileged position of philosophy and theology is variously reiterated in *Living Difference III* syllabus (cf. Hampshire, Portsmouth Southampton & Isle of Wight Councils 2016, 8, 11, 27, 43, 51, 54-5, 59-60). Concerning the social practices of reference in Hannam's RE proposal, it should be evident at this point that they are identified with the social/political life, which is peculiarly understood as an equivalent of leading also an existential-religious life, in a kind of 'mysticization' of said social/political life.

4.4.4 Evaluation and Criticism

The Existential-instrumental approach also presents many elements at odds with a SoR-based RE approach and critical issues in regard

to the topic of East-Asian religions. The first point is epistemological. While the former aims at studying religions and religion primarily for the sake of increasing knowledge and understanding, the 'existential-instrumental approach', as the chosen label indicates, is mostly aimed at having an educative effect on the pupils, especially on the 'existential/spiritual' dimension. With this observation I do not intend to say that a study of religion\s-inspired epistemology is absolutely neutral and objective, especially in a context of didactic transposition when the axiological dimension is also at stake. However, as it has been already discussed, the study of religion has been chosen as the epistemological reference due to its constant self-criticism and historical consciousness, so that religions may be engaged in the most impartial way and represented in all their possible complexities. Therefore, the fact that Erricker and Hannam subordinate to certain educational goals the way in which religion should be studied begs the question of how much the impartiality of the conceptualizations and representation of religion will be affected. From the point of view of the study of religion\s, especially for what concerns East-Asian religions, the answer is that these traditions are clearly engaged in unacceptable ways.

Erricker offers various examples in which his general aim of providing pupils with 'existential/spiritual tools' to be taken from other religions is discernible. First, we have seen its specific preference for doctrinal element in its choice the type C concepts which make up Hinduism and Buddhism. Next, let us recall the cycle on Hinduism, its overarching evaluative question: "How effective is the concept of *saṃsāra* as an explanation of change?", and the pupil's feedback:

> For me, Shiva Nataraj is a symbol to show that my life is always changing. If I try to stop it changing, I will fail. You cannot stop change. […] We don't want to grow older. We don't want to leave our family. We don't want to die. But we will, and we have to accept it.

This seems to me more of a theological enquiry, which is not very different from Wright and Barnes's approach. What I mean is that this pupil gauges how much a certain concept of a certain religion is apt to describe a certain aspect of his/her reality. But does this approach help to explore the multifariousness of this important aspect of Hinduism? It seems to me it does not. Indeed, instead of being presented as a pivotal concept in the cosmological and eschatological discourses of various traditions of Indian origin, *saṃsāra* here is taken as a sort of worldview concerning the general issue of change in this present world.

In other words, there is a clear tendency towards a modernization/de-mythologization of this concept. Other similar examples are the inclusion of *bhavana*, understood as "mental culture or development"

(Erricker 2010, 156) inside the type C key concepts of Buddhism, and its use in the cycle of learning on meditation and on the wheel of existence, which also includes a practical attempt to meditate (155-9). By doing so, important dimensions of the religious life of the majority of Buddhist practitioners (worship, rituals, other cultivational practices) are neglected (cf. above, § 3.2.3). In other words, what we see here are clear examples of the modern domestication of foreign traditions, cherry-picking certain elements (*saṃsāra*, meditation) and arranging them in a way that runs the serious risk of perpetuating all those stratifications of exotic and orientalist representations that picture East-Asian religions as mainly philosophical or 'mystical' (cf. §§ 3.3.2, 3.3.3 and 3.3.4.). Even the seemingly innocent choice of having pupils meditating may perpetuate the modern and orientalist rhetoric that religions, especially East-Asian religions, cannot be fully understood in logical-discursive language. Even more seriously, it reinforces the modernist idea that, while meditation is the key practice[28] defining Buddhism as such, paradoxically, it is also a culture- and history-free technique easily detachable from its Buddhist context (cf. § 3.3.4) and that it can be thus proposed as an activity for pupils without fear of being accused of indoctrination.

A similar discourse can be made concerning Hannam. First, her approach is highly problematic from a general perspective of the study of religion\s. She claims that to conceptualize religion as an object ultimately disconnects religious education from the 'lived experience', and that knowledge and reasoning is unlikely to be able to sufficiently address 'what it means to be religious'. This entails a *sui generis* discourse about religion which is reminiscent of those romantic attempts to preserve religion in general, and Christianity in particular, from rationalist attacks through the creation of the rhetoric of religious experience. These are all ideas which feed into the problematic paradigm of phenomenology of religion (cf. §§ 2.1.1, 2.1.5 and the first part of 3.2.3). Furthermore, her approach leads her not only to privilege the existential way of conceptualizing religions, but to reinforce the orientalist paradigm that East-Asian religion are best understood through the existential conceptualization of religion, basically perpetuating that stereotype of intuitive, irrational Asia (§ 3.3.4), whose roots, we have seen, trace back to the romantic and transcendentalist movements (§ 3.3.2). Indeed, in her example of a learning cycle on Buddhism, the overarching question "can meditation help people overcome suffering?" is explored by focusing mainly on the historical Buddha and its first teachings, to shift then directly to the contemporary use of meditation as a tool for "recov-

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[28] Indeed, Erricker characterizes *karuṇā* as being developed by Buddhist by means of meditation (2010, 137), which is a quite a reductive, romantic and simplified definition.

ering from post-traumatic stress disorder" (Hampshire, Portsmouth Southampton & Isle of Wight Councils 2016, 49). The historical diversity of meditation – not to mention other practices – within Buddhism is addressed only in very general terms with sweeping indications. In this representation we can see both the influence of the nineteenth century idea that the real Buddhism was limited to the first development from the historical Buddha, and the contemporary idea that meditation is the central-yet-detachable technique.

Furthermore, the point of view of the study of religion\s, always in connection to the theme of East-Asian religions, is called upon also in questioning how much the educational goal of the 'spiritual development' is based on impartial grounds and is it compatible with intercultural goals. Indeed, if RE is to help pupils to develop 'spiritually', this entails a series of problematic issues. Let us consider the constructivist and post-modern framework, proposed by Erricker, in which the teacher is conceived as a facilitator. Even in such an anti-foundational approach, if the goal is to reach 'spiritual development', then some sort of 'standards of spirituality' must be implicitly or explicitly set. An example of spiritual development is exemplified by Erricker by narrating the experience of his own seven year old daughter coping with the issue of communicating with his deceased grandfather, who was cremated. She wrote and then burned a letter in order to communicate with him (Erricker 2010, 71-3). From the point of view of the study of religion\s, this story represents a phenomenon that may be explained by a cognitive science approach, conceiving the behavior of the daughter as an example of human imagination breaching and transferring in a counter-intuitive way the ontological properties of objects. In this case using the symbolism of ashes (cf. § 2.1.7; cf. also Jensen 2014, chs 4 and 5). However, while our interpretation of the symbolic thinking and acting of this child is just one way of describing the phenomenon, for Erricker this very symbolic thinking and acting aimed at giving meaning to a certain life-event is taken as the 'ought' of the spiritual experience. In other words, there is a normative definition of what a spiritual experience should be. However, we have seen how the idea of spirituality, and especially its understanding as a neutral common ground of all religions, stripped of the ritual or doctrinal 'trappings', has instead a well-defined genealogy and development within modern Euro-American cultures (§ 3.2.4) and has been often instrumentally applied to the representation of East-Asian religions (§§ 3.3.3 and 3.3.4).

This is even more conspicuous in Hannam, who sets three general methodological steps or thresholds to be reached by pupils: 'attention', 'intellectual humility' and 'discernment', which are explicitly inspired by Weil's philosophy. This means that the ideas and experience of a single modern, European and Christianity-inspired thinker are defined as possible exemplification of an allegedly universal

existential religious path. Paradoxically, the very idea of exploiting this 'existential' way of being religious in order to 'be open' towards something new, or to be intellectually humble in front of the otherness of the world, actually ends up in subsuming such otherness, i.e. the complexity of various religious traditions under a very limited set of modern and Christian perspectives. This means that, if RE is to develop this 'spirituality' in pupils through the encounter with various religions, the representation of these latter will inevitably be adapted, domesticated in function of a well-defined, normative, and modern idea of spirituality, which tends to emphasize the 'inner' dimension at the expenses of 'outer' material and social-institutional aspects (§ 3.2.4). Given the long and influent history of the orientalist stereotypes of Asian religions, the ways in which of Erricker and Hannam have handled the theme East-Asian traditions further increase the risk of portraying them as bearers of an 'eternal wisdom' or 'spirituality', to be individually experienced, especially in non-rational ways.

We have seen (§ 2.2.7) that in the axiological frame of reference for our RE, that of intercultural education, certain competences are needed in order to engage the complexities of cultures and religions in all their aspects. Among these latter also are included all those critical and analytical skills that enable us to expose the possible biases, presuppositions and assumptions that, as in such cases as that of Erricker and Hannam, make us project on different traditions those images and values that actually belong to our historical and intellectual heritage (§ 2.2.8, cf. also *infra*, § 5.2.2). From the observations above, it should be clear that the 'existential-instrumental' approach is clearly at odds with these educational goals, especially if we are to deal with East-Asian traditions. The overall educational goal of this approach is the development of an existential/spiritual dimension, which is ultimately an emic, modern, Euro-American idea passed off as a universal constant. This obviously does not help exploring Japanese and other East-Asian traditions, especially their pre-modern history. Actually, it risks hindering the exploration of those entangled histories, often with power-related aspects, through which, for example, Hinduist or Daoist traditions, shifted from being despised as magical superstitions to being praised as spiritual remedies for the contemporary world. As a matter of fact, one of the aims of the RE I am proposing is exactly the unveiling of the very pretension of neutrality and universality of this concept of 'spirituality' and highlighting the role that this ambiguous concept had in historically regulating the discourses and judgments about East-Asian traditions (cf. also ch. 5).

4.5 English RE: Interpretive-Dialogical Approach

4.5.1 Introduction

Under this label I want to address in the first place the work of Robert Jackson, Emeritus Professor of Religions and Education at the University of Warwick. He is probably the most renowned scholar (coming from the field of education) for what concerns RE in both UK and in Europe, and possibly beyond. His theoretical approach to RE, called the 'interpretive approach' (Jackson 1997) has proven quite influential also beyond the British borders, and he and his team have become increasingly involved in supranational research projects and other RE-related activities, such as the EU funded project REDCo: *Religion in Education. A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries* (2006-2009). Jackson has cooperated with the OSCE/ODIHR's drafting of the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs* (OSCE/ODIHR 2007) and has contributed to a number of the Council of Europe's (CoE) initiatives and publications on religious diversity and education since 2002 (cf. e.g. CoE 2007). He contributed to the drafting of the recommendation by the Committee of Ministers on teaching about religions and non-religious convictions (CoE 2008a). Recently, he authored the CoE's *Signposts: Policy and Practice for Teaching About Religions and Non-Religious Worldviews* (CoE 2014), which summarizes various perspectives on this issue. Here, however, we will address his contributions as an individual scholar.

I am grouping under the label 'interpretive-dialogical' the works of Jackson and of other authors because Jackson's work laid the foundation for other strands of RE research focused especially on the theme of dialogue, in its various dimensions both in UK and beyond. Among these scholars we can cite Julia Ipgrave. Her proposal envisions a teacher/researcher who provides little but systematical input and acts more as a facilitator of the dialogue, providing further information only if required. Pupils encounter diverse religious traditions through dialogue with peers or invited religious practitioners. Pupils are asked to set out the ethos and rules for engaging with difference and learning from it by themselves. Finally, she recommends easing the personal engagement of the pupils to have them express, negotiate and justify their own views (Ipgrave 2001; 2003). Other notable authors beyond UK borders are Heid Leganger-Krogstad and Weisse (cf. Jackson 2004, 107-25).

The author to whom I will focus here is Kevin O'Grady, Associate Fellow at the Centre for Education Studies at University of Warwick. He studied under Jackson and cooperated in projects such as the above-mentioned REDCo project. O'Grady's approach relies heavi-

ly on the methodology of action-research not only "as a methodology but also [as] curricular and pedagogical principles" (O'Grady 2019, 4), and while in his monograph examined here the interpretive approach is not explicitly discussed, elsewhere he attested how this latter provided the theoretical foundation for his own research (O'Grady 2013). The reason for choosing his work (O'Grady 2019) among those of other authors, apart from being the most recent contribution, lies in his emphasis on RE as subject that fosters "democratic citizenship through the study of religions" (subtitle of O'Grady 2019), which resonates with my proposal of 'social practice of intercultural citizenship' as the social practice of reference for RE.

4.5.2 Concept, Epistemology and Representations of Religion

Jackson approaches is influenced by the hermeneutical anthropology of Clifford Geertz but also in dialogue with other relevant authors such as Edward Said, Vincent Crapanzano, James Clifford and others (Jackson 1997, 30-49, 72-95). Drawing on these insights, Jackson proposes to look at cultures as having fuzzy edges and being internally diverse, negotiated and contested. This is because individuals can draw on a large pool of cultural resources, and there are overlapping points between public and private spheres, with communities and groups that act as kinds of intermediate bodies. Thus, both ethnicity and nationality are not fixed but equally construed and negotiated dimensions. This emphasis on the complexities and 'fuzziness' of social and cultural realities, and the relative implications for the researcher who must also consider personal and power-related factors, can be seen as the general *leitmotiv* of Jackson's approach to both religion and education fields.

Concerning the issue of the concept of religion, Jackson positions himself in that trend of scholarship which sees 'religion' and 'religions' as categories originating in the West and having a particular history and different meanings in different times. Nonetheless, they can still be used as

> useful analytical categories in relation to sets of *beliefs, practices, experiences and values dealing with fundamental existential questions, such as those of birth, identity and death*. (Jackson 2008b, 21; italics added)

The various phenomena thus identified can be regrouped by means of family resemblance, avoiding posing and identifying any essence of religion. However, "some degree of transcendental reference", although endowed with different meanings, can be posited as a common point (21). From an ontological point of view, he does not endorse a

non-realist position, but simply recognizes that religions, along with other "broad patterns of social and cultural life, such as 'work', 'family', 'politics', 'childhood', 'law', 'marriage" are

> social and cultural constructs, the meaning of which has changed over time, varies in different cultural situations and has never been universally agreed. (20)

This applies in particular to contemporary times where factors of globalization and localization move religions on one hand towards individualization and, on the other, towards the strengthening of religious authority (22). Additionally, religions are to be recognized especially as "communicative processes" (22).

Jackson proposes a sophisticated matrix of levels that make up a religion and account for its internal diversity, complexity and the fuzziness of both internal and external borders. He suggests looking at religions as being formed by the dialectical interplay on three levels. Firstly, the individual, including his/her experiences, feelings, attitude, and language, other than mere beliefs and practices. Secondly, the tradition at large, which must be conceived as being interpreted and considered differently depending on the individuals who participated in it. Thirdly, the last level is membership group which is to be employed as a loose concept, as it could mean both a large subdivision within the broad tradition (e.g. Protestant) or a range of subdivisions (e.g. liberal, charismatic) down to the narrower denomination (e.g. Baptists) or local groups within the denomination. This is the level at which most of the social, political and power-related dynamics are more evident and where the mediation between 'individuals' and larger 'tradition' takes place (Jackson 1997, 60-9; 2008a, 172-3; 2008b, 15-16). From a didactic point of view, this matrix allows pupils to encounter a religious tradition starting from any point: a narrative describing the broader tradition in general terms, a more circumscribed account of a religious membership group or the single biography of one person. From here the exploration can shift to other levels and see how the interpretation of the whole religious tradition proceeds through the interplay among the levels. In other words, the hermeneutical circle between parts and the whole.

Turning our attention to O'Grady, although he aligns himself in general to Jackson's approach, for what concerns the concept of religion he relies on Smart's theory (esp. Smart 1996) and his "dialectical phenomenology" (O'Grady 2019, 122). Religions can be analyzed in seven dimensions which are mutually interrelated. These are the doctrinal, mythological-narrative, ethical, experiential, ritual, institutional and material-artistic dimension. Modalities and degrees of interaction between dimensions vary among religions. O'Grady explains his choice by asserting that such a conception of religion

serves multiple aims, such as reducing "the danger of essentialism" (122), countering the critiques against overemphasis on personal experience (e.g. Wright and Barnes), but also criticizing the idea that religions are primary built around system of beliefs (158).

This multidimensional approach notwithstanding, O'Grady seems still to hold some kind of *sui generis* attitude towards religion\s: he says, for example, that it would be a misrepresentation if we "fail to acknowledge that religious adherents may understand their texts, beliefs or practices to originate in and point towards transcendental realities", and that religions can be engaged as cultural phenomena, but this does do not means a 'reduction' from being also conceived as "revealed truth" and "responses to ethical and existential dilemma" (184-5). That such views are at odds with the more critical stances in the field of the study of religion\s is clear in O'Grady's explicit dismissal of Fitzgerald's critique (2000; cf. above, §§ 2.1.5 and 2.1.8) to the concept of religion (O'Grady 2019, 133-4), and in his suggestion that what is "distinctively religious or sacred" should not be neglected (196). However, no further details are provided.

Concerning the issue of the representation of religion, Jackson's concept of matrix has given us already some hints. Additionally we should note that his theoretical move is explicitly aimed at highlighting how the individual is always participating in multiple identity groups (ethnic, religious, language-related, etc.), an example of which are the young British Hindus who tend to distinguish themselves from British non-Hindus by emphasis on vegetarianism, but also from older generations by distancing themselves from *jāti*-groupism and adopting protestant-influenced ideas on religion (Jackson 1997, 65-9). Another important element is that his approach developed primarily out of the insights gained from ethnographic research on the religious nurture of children (age 8-13) in various British religious communities, especially from minorities, both old (Jewish, Catholics) and new (Islam, Hindu, Sikh).

Jackson and his team developed a series of textbooks in which they translated the ethnographic materials gathered. Insiders such as families, local and national religious leader were also involved in checking, commenting, and criticizing the materials during the development process (more details in Jackson 1997, 94-112).

The results are didactic materials which focus on real British children as representative of each of the religions traditions presented, who accompany the reader through the books. As an example of which aspects are represented in such materials, we can pick the textbook on Hinduism designed for KS3 pupils (Wayne et al. 1996), whose selection of topics focuses on a quite broad range of practices (I quote *verbatim* the title of chapters): "Worship and Prayer: Ways of Worshipping"; "Worship and Prayer: Picturing God"; "Food and Fasting"; "Marriage and the Family"; "Family Celebrations – Life Names";

"Visiting Gurus", sided by several sections on festivals: "Holi and Janmashtami"; "Keeping in Touch – Raksha Bandhan"; "Navaratri"; and "Divali". Fewer sections focus on doctrines and texts: "The Atman and the Cycle of Life, Death and Rebirth"; "Karma and the Law of Karma"; "The Bhagavad Gita" and the "Ramayana". There are also sections devoted to important places or notable persons: "The Mandir – The Temple"; "Mother Ganga – A Sacred River of India";"Jalaram Bapa – A Saint from Gujarat" and "Mahatma Gandhi". Other sections deal with general ethical and social aspects: "Respect for the Natural World"; "Respect for Life" and "Belonging to a Community of Communities; Who Am I?". One section is devoted to the topic of inner diversity: "Learning about Hindu Traditions".

In each of these sections, statements from the featured children are provided. For example, in the chapter "Karma and the Law of Karma" one child says: "If I do something good, I hope for a good life next time. If you do good it will be better next time, I hope!" (Wayne et al. 1996, 24). These statements, comments and other information about these children are sided with general explanations of the key concept provided by authors, along with other examples from individual or collective group of insiders and citations from authoritative texts. This is the practical application of the threefold matrix, in which different insiders' voices are presented within a framework of a general understanding of the broader traditions. As for the selection on topics, the above list of chapters shows an equilibrated representation of various aspects, without excessive focus on the 'usual suspects' such as doctrines and texts. We can see a pupil-centered focus of the interpretive approach in the number of topics of potential interest and motivation for children, such as festivals and food, or topics which they can easily relate to, such as family- and community-linked themes. On top of that, of course, there is the expedient itself portraying the personal voices and experiences of children. This is expected to foster involvement and responsiveness, for the reason that these figures act as insiders, but, at the same time, they are also peers to which other UK pupils are expected to interact with. Such emphasis on 'peer-insiders' is even more evident in the decision of "mak[ing] use of categories or division within the tradition" (Jackson 1997, 110), and arranging topics around insiders' categories. For example, in a KS2 textbook on Christianity topics are organized under "'joining', 'learning', 'believing and worshipping', 'prayer and praise', the 'Bible', 'living as a Christian', 'sharing' and 'caring for others'" (115). What seems missing in this modality of representation is a diachronic view of religious diversity, even if we have seen how the historical aspect of religion\s is not completely ignored by Jackson on a theoretical level. It seems that diversity within a tradition is not explored trough historical development but simply as a given fact. Meijer (2004) too notes this missing dimension.

Concerning O'Grady's work, on one side he recommends that religions should be engaged in a

broad, balanced, multi-aspectual way, with attention to expressions including beliefs, texts, rituals, myths, art, architecture, ethics, social and political views and practices and how these interact. (O'Grady 2019, 195)

On the other side, however, he also emphasizes that RE's focus should be on plural beliefs and values in function of the development of identity, which is the key question for adolescents (47). Therefore, religious material should be chosen so that pupils may be helped in clarifying their own beliefs and values through them. Pupils are invited to address materials through their own questions and concerns about "existential and ethical interest and matters of personal significance" (191-2). This is also the reason why O'Grady does not discuss in detail which aspects of religion should be privileged. In fact, in his suggested action-research approach, the contents and methods of RE lesson should be 'co-planned' with the pupils in order to individuate themes and activities that motivate them the most (19-21). We have however some examples from his own action-research. In a cycle of lessons on Islam, one of the topics chosen was the life of Muhammad, where pupils (age 11-14) were "tasked to imagine that they could interview Muhammad about his life and to list the questions they would ask" (76). Among these questions O'Grady highlights those involving the personal views of the pupils. For example, how did it feel for Mohammed to be rejected and forced from Mecca, compared to the personal experience of one pupil who had to leave the US. Next, they explored the concept of *tawḥīd* or oneness of Allah. Pupils were asked to create artistic artifacts through which they would also "relate the words to their own personal circumstances" and "showing what the idea of oneness means to you personally" (77). Other topics were *zakat* or mandatory charitable contribution, the ritual prayer and a comparative examination of general 'Islam values' in order to discuss "how do Islamic values compare to those of the members of our class, or help us to understand our own values?" (78).

As a retrospective comment on his own work, O'Grady does ask himself whether putting more focus on motivating pupils to investigate their own concerns, rather than presenting religious traditions exhaustively, was a balanced choice (26-8). Nevertheless, he claims the success of this strategy in raising motivation. He also acknowledges that, in order to provide a broader representation of religions, Smart's approach can be improved by incorporating media portrayals of religions and making pupils reflect on how these could affect their views (143).

Lastly, coherently with the pupil-centered approach, it is O'Grady's conviction (cf. also Jackson 2004, 179) to also include non-religious worldviews as contents to be addressed in RE. Since the main educational aims of his RE is to foster democratic participation and citizenship competences through RE dialogues, and since many pupils do not necessarily identify themselves as religious, in order to motivate them into dialogue their perspectives must also be taken into account (160).

Shifting to the topic of the epistemological perspective, we have already seen that Jackson's interpretive approach draws from social sciences such as anthropology. The very word 'interpretive' that he uses is explicitly taken from Geertz's *Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). In particular, he employs idea of the 'textualization' of the ethnographic data, that is the treatment of the single part or 'sign' (concept, institutions, etc.) as a part of a web of semantic relations with all the other 'signs', which the ethnographer must interpret in its various meanings through a dialectic between parts and the whole. It is the well-known device of 'thick description'. For Geertz, says Jackson, the ethnographer's work is more akin to that of the literary critic, whose interpretive nature – i.e. the subjectivity the interpreter – must be explicit. Jackson refers especially to the moment in which the ethnographer creates a bridge through a back-and-forth movement between *experience-near* concepts and *experience-far* concepts (Jackson 1997, 32-8). He also cites Waardernburg's (1978) 'new style' of phenomenology, according to which *epoché* should be extended to the concept of religion itself and there must be a due acknowledgment of other social, cultural and economic contexts. Moreover, there is the acknowledgment of the active role of researcher's imagination in recreating the 'structures of intentionality' of others. All this, according to Jackson, resonates with Geertz' contextual and creative hermeneutical exercise (Jackson 1997, 25-8, 38).

Such appreciation of the active role of the observer's subjectivity is balanced by Jackson by the acknowledgement of the risks of projection of one's own biases and stereotypes inherent in every analysis of any cultural object. In this sense, Jackson also considers the insights of the deconstructive ethnography of authors such as Clifford and Crapanzano, who emphasize the fictionalities of any ethnographic descriptions and the need to be aware of the subjectivity and authorial power of the researcher, as well as the inner contradictions and contestation within any cultural group observed (38-43). Such attention to critical and reflective issues is also present with direct reference to religion. In fact, Jackson discusses, drawing from Wilfred C. Smith (1963), how the history of the European concept of 'religion' came to be essentialized as a 'system of beliefs' approachable only through a *sui generis*, experiential approach. Just as we have seen in previous sections (§ 2.1.5), Jackson too recognizes how these

historical developments influenced the use of term 'world religion', which came to refer to traditions allegedly having a strong degree of homogeneity as discrete belief systems and a universal message/mission. Furthermore, the superimposition of European ideas on non-European realities reflects the hegemonic orientalist practice that highly influenced the representations of religions, essentializing a dichotomy between 'us' as liberal and rational *versus* 'them' as exotic, strange and mystical (Jackson 1997, 49-59).

Turning our attention to O'Grady, he does not further develop the overall epistemological framework of Jackson, but he instead focuses on the issue of interpretation in a very broad way and with a direct relevance for what it is expected from pupils. In other words, O'Grady, differently from Jackson, does not discuss how religion\s should be epistemologically engaged in general, but, more specifically, how pupils are expected to do this. In his words, "religious traditions should be opened to *interpretation*, *criticism* and *response*" (O'Grady 2019, 47; italics added).

Concerning *interpretation* and *response*, according to O'Grady, hermeneutics (especially from a Gadamerian point of view) should be applied in RE to foster expansion of pupils' horizons through encounters between pupils and religious traditions, as well as between pupils and pupils. These encounters, he states, "always have potential to generate new and significant meaning" (192). Indeed, as the subtitle of his monograph affirms, RE should be set up as a "dialogue with difference" and in such "hermeneutical pedagogy", the pupils' responses from their dialogues with religious traditions have "equal status to material from religious traditions" (48). The engagement and dialogue with religions should be as motivating and involving as possible, also at personal level, provided that it is the pupil who decides the level of involvement. Even if they "should not necessarily view the beliefs and practices of others as options for themselves", they should "at least, try to appreciate the meaning of those beliefs and practices to those others" (179). Through such dialogues, pupils need to become aware of their own background assumptions or influences determined by variables such as gender (193). They are also expected to make comparisons and contrasts with their own perspectives, drawing conclusion about question of various nature, value-related questions included (195).

Concerning *criticism*, O'Grady affirms that "RE should not overemphasise religious experience nor deny pupils opportunities for critical debate" (193) since the 'assessment' (i.e. value judgment) of religions by the pupils is an inevitable outcome (132). He sympathetically recalls that Smart too lamented about the "sloganistic use of 'the phenomenology of religion' to divorce religious studies from questions of truth and meaning" (132), and adds that, even if a broader and balanced study of religion\s is preferable, the question of truth-claims of

religion should not be excluded, but instead addressed through critical and philosophical tools (193).

Continuing with the issue of the 'truth-claims' of religion, and specifically of their existential relevance for the pupils, we note that also in Jackson's work – notwithstanding the robust grounding on academic studies on religions – we find ambiguous statements about this topic. In trying to anticipate criticism to his approach for being 'relativistic', he affirms that his suggested RE "does not imply a methodological assumption that religions are equally true" (Jackson 1997, 123), a statement that is at odds with the methodological agnosticism of the study of religion\s. Indeed, on one side his approach and materials "do not explore truth-claims" because it "is not their job" (125); on the other, "it does, however, leave question of truth and value open, to be pursued as a part of religious education" (122), with the only caveat of exercising caution in respect to the youngest pupils and minorities. Nonetheless, in the case that pupils raise such issues, teachers "should not stifle or prevent such discussions" (125).

In summary, we can see how, for both Jackson and O'Grady, the active involvement of the pupil is the factor that ultimately guides their approach. To Jackson, RE is fundamentally about "existential and social debates in which pupils are encouraged to participate, with a personal stake" (Jackson 2004, 18), and what distinguishes RE from other fields are these "fundamental concerns in relation to existential and social questions and the data of religious traditions" (18). Therefore, the "personal agency" of the pupil is "an important ingredient of religious education" (163). Such emphasis on subjective involvement of pupils is not without reason and it depends, as we will see, on the broad educational framework – in terms of both aims and methods – in which these RE proposals are built.

4.5.3 Educational Dimension and Didactic Transposition

The influence of anthropology and ethnography can also be seen in what Jackson proposes as the main learning processes the pupils are expected to go through. The first one is called *Interpretation*, in which the pupils should not leave aside their presuppositions (as in phenomenology), but make comparisons between their owns concepts and the phenomena studied. The point is to individuate possible overlapping of meanings or contrasts and to apply a back-and-forward movement from one's own perspective and that of the insider, aided by "analogous experiences" (cf. Jackson 1997, 110-11; 2009, 402). A practical example would be as follows:

> For example, in introducing young children (aged 5-7) to a boy from a Buddhist family sitting quietly in a meditation hall at a

rural English Thai Forest Hermitage monastery the teacher explores "noisy times" and "quiet times" with children in the class. [...] They then listen to the story of the Buddhist boy's visit to the monastery and start to think about why he might be having a "quiet time" in the meditation hall. The teacher feeds the information from the book and the children compare their ideas about "quiet times" with those of the Buddhist family. (Jackson 2008a, 174)

Such drawing on personal experiences or on familiar ideas in order to interpret material is called 'building bridges' in the textbook developed by Jackson and colleagues, and it has to be coupled with another hermeneutical exercise, called 'working it out'. This latter refers to the interpretive process of moving between the parts and the whole of the phenomena/'text' studied, which is, the above-mentioned hermeneutical process throughout the three levels: individual, membership groups and tradition (Jackson 1997, 115-16).

The learning process of interpretation, as it directly touches the personal experience of the pupils, is expected to foster another important process called 'reflexivity', understood as "the relationship between the experience of students and the experience of those whose way of life they are attempting to interpret" (Jackson 2009, 402), and it is further divided in 'constructive criticism' and 'edification'. The former refers to the ability to critically examine the material studied and the methods applied, and it is linked with the issue of representation above discussed. In other words, pupils should be taught to consciously adopt a critical stance towards their own learning methods and try to identify possible bias in their representation, as well as to be sensitive to representational biases or clichés in the material studied, such as newspapers (Jackson 1997, 129; 2009, 404). The 'edification' process is slightly more complex, and Jackson takes direct inspiration from the thoughts of famous anthropologists who stressed how the engagement with different cultures brought them to reflect on their own background and assumptions. He cites from Edmund Leach:

> The scholarly justification for studying 'others' rather than 'ourselves' is that, although we first perceive the others as exotic, we end up recognizing in their 'peculiarities' a mirror of our own. (Leach 1982, 127, cit. in Jackson 1997, 130)

And from Victor Turner:

> When we have become comfortable within the other culture [...] and turn to gaze back to our native land, we find that the familiar has become exoticed; we see it with new eyes. The commonplace has become marvelous. What we took for granted now has

the power to stir our scientific imaginations. (Turner 1978, XIII-XIV, cit. in Jackson 1997, 133)

Pupils are thus encouraged to re-assess the understanding of their own worldviews through the challenge of 'unpacking' others' worldviews and by trying to relate to them through their own concepts and experience. Whatever differences there might appear to be between the pupil's way of life and the way of life being studied, Jackson says,

> there may also be common features or points of contact or overlap. What might appear to be entirely 'other' might link with one's own experience in such a way that new perspectives are created or unquestioned presuppositions are challenged. (Jackson 2009, 403)

Jackson links his idea of edification with the above cited RE key attainment target of 'learning from religion' (1997, 131-2). He does so especially in reference to the original formulation of this concept by Michael Grimmit, which focuses on personal introspection, on one's own "ultimate questions", on "signals of transcendence", on "influence of their own beliefs and values on their development as persons", and "responsibility for their own decision-making, especially in matters of personal belief and conduct" (Grimmit 1987, 255). Jackson, in his interpretation of Grimmit's ideas, affirms that, since interpretation stems from a dialectic movement between self and other, such 'self' should be put in the foreground. In the textbooks, for example, there are indications about encouraging students to re-examine aspects of their own understanding in the light of topics encountered in specific religious traditions, but "which also have universal significance" (Wayne et al. 1996, 4). Thus, RE should make

> pupils and their concerns a key element in religious education, reducing the amount of 'content' that the subject has, making time and space for reflective activity and dealing with the emotional as well as the rational. (Jackson 2004, 74)

Just like the experience of their editorial counterparts in the textbooks

> pupils' own religio-cultural experiences, reflections and interactions can and should be part of the subject matter of religious education. (108)

This methodology is further encouraged since

> a religious education disconnected from pupils' own questions and concerns is very likely to fail to engage and to motivate them. (Jackson 2009, 403)

Therefore, Jackson presents various case studies in which this "potentially transformative character of religious education" (108) is highlighted as successful examples of the implementation of his interpretive approach. These are cases in which a teacher manages to connect religious material to the "spiritual needs" of his/her pupils with special needs, or cases in which the "affective concerns" (106) of the pupils represent the starting point, and the teacher encourages them to reflect on existential questions and connect them with material from wider religious and nonreligious sources (107).

Turning our attention to O'Grady, his broad education framework has three main interrelated strands. The first is an underpinning Deweyan philosophy of education, the second is the focus on the issue of motivation, and the third is the establishment of 'democratic citizenship' as one of RE's main aims.

Concerning the first strand, according to John Dewey the process of education necessarily implies co-partnership and shared commitments to agreed values and modalities of interactions between competing rationalities towards the "promotion of respectful and fair consideration of all" (133). Moreover, Dewey's approach is highly child-centered, in the sense that teachers are supposed to acts as a 'facilitator' rather than someone instilling knowledge in empty heads. It also means that the

> aims of education cannot properly be imposed from outside the pupil and [...] that pupils should experience a sense of themselves as unique individuals, whose opinions matter and who have something positive to contribute to society. (37)

This leads to the second strand, which is motivation. To motivate pupils in RE, O'Grady suggest that this subject must touch "the development of identity" which "is the key question for adolescents" (47), by "link[ing] their own questions and concerns to religious material" (193). This is the reason why pupils should be involved as co-planners of their own learning, keeping logs of their impressions and providing feedbacks, through interviews with the teacher, about the contents and methods of their RE lessons. These are then taken into account by the teacher who adjusts the curriculum and practices accordingly (55-66). Furthermore, by making pupils responsible for communal decision about their own education, such an approach is presented as fostering democratic education, since it increases

> the choice, responsibility and participation of pupils both as ends in themselves and as preparation for adult life in a diverse society. (28)

This leads to the third strand, with which also wrap up the previous two. For O'Grady, contribution to democratic citizenship should be

RE's overarching aim (8), which is in accord with Dewey's lesson that the support of democratic social order is the "fundamental purpose of education" (193). How can child-centeredness, motivation, identity and democratic citizenship be combined together? O'Grady's key argument is that, in the case of the adolescent, elements of education for identity overlap with those of citizenship education. Such overlapping occurs because both educational processes focused on the development of autonomy and commitment to a coherent set of values. Thus, in one case they may represent the responsibility of oneself as adult citizen, in the other case such commitment to a coherent set of values represents no other than "a part of a person's sense of himself or herself" (38, cf. 33-41).

RE enters in this context as it represents an occasion for a "dialogue with difference" (subtitle of the book). For O'Grady dialogue must feature "attentive listening", promote "the expression and consideration of different perspectives" in a "safe but not necessarily comfortable environment". Disagreements should come to the surface and pupils should be challenged by diversity (3). This diversity is brought about by a "broad, multi-aspectual knowledge and understanding of religion" (193) that RE should foster. By dialoguing and personally engaging the plurality of beliefs and values explored through RE, for example, by discovering that religions are internally diverse, pupils may become "more flexible about their own identities" (149). Through being challenged by plurality and diversity embodied by both learning materials and their peers' personal response to these materials, pupils may gain awareness of what shapes their identity and their own background assumptions (193). They should also start investigating constraints such as media influences or gender biases on their ability to engage sympathetically and critically with the traditions of others (149). If conflicts emerge in such processes, these should be investigated rather than smoothed over, since conflicts can intensify or even generate a good dialogue, provided that pupils also need to learn to disagree constructively (a competence in itself linked to citizenship education) (146-7).

In summary, for O'Grady RE is particularly effective when put in a framework of citizenship education, because it brings the challenge of diversity and plurality, especially in "issues of existential and ethical interest and in matters of personal significance" (195). These latter are what RE should focus on, because of their effectiveness in stirring up questions related to identity development in pupils. This engagement on the personal level of the pupils,[29] the responsible participation in their own learning and the practice of dialogue with their accom-

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[29] It must be noted that O'Grady maintains that it is up to the pupil to decide the degree of personal investment in RE (O'Grady 2019, 196).

panying processes of *interpretation* and *reflexivity*, are thus argued to be key factors in developing competences of citizenship education.

All these observations leave us with very little doubt on which social practices of reference O'Grady has in mind.

Also Jackson investigates the connections between religious education, intercultural education and citizenship education. He draws a parallel between the problem of the old paradigm of multicultural education, charged with essentialism and stereotypes as it portrayed cultures as self-enclosed wholes, and the similar problem in the representation of religions. Ongoing debates in the social sciences as well as in intercultural education emphasize the dynamic interaction, contestation and negotiation inherent in socio-cultural phenomena, so that borders between socio-cultural groups are rather fuzzy and individuals continuously reshape their culture by drawing from a variety of both autochthonous and foreign sources (Jackson 2004, 126-31). To overcome reification and stereotypization which may fuel intolerance and racism, the representation of this complexity should be implemented in education. The same argument applies to the representation of religions which, due to its strong connection to identity and ethnicity discourses, is especially critical when it comes to political issues such as coexistence with minority groups (Jackson 2005, 5-8). In such a situation, Jackson argues that the interpretive approach can adequately provide the needed education to this complexity. First, the threefold matrix of the representation of religions follows the same exact logic of avoiding reification and emphasizing complexity. Secondly, the process of *reflexivity* gives pupils opportunities to consider the "impact of new learning on their own belief and values and to apply critical judgment in a constructive, rational and informed way" (10), while clarifying at the same time "their own sense of identity in relation to place and personal and family history" (Jackson 2004, 141). Thirdly, the interpretive approach fosters interactionist/dialogical attitudes since it focuses on engaging the real lives of insiders (such as the pupils portrayed in the textbook) and on developing dialogue and mutual learning among classmates, thus preparing for future intercultural encounters.

Concerning citizenship education, Jackson considers the school as a "microcosmos of democratic society and therefore the ideal place to practice ideas of citizenship" (138). Since the argument that religions are nowadays reduced to the mere private dimension of individuals is not feasible anymore (Jackson 2003, 62-9; 2004, 4-21, 139), this citizenship practice could and should be informed by an understanding of the different religious traditions at their various levels of individual, membership groups and tradition at large (70). Moreover, the dialogue-focused developments of the interpretive approach (i.e. O'Grady's), are seen by Jackson as maximizing the participation of the pupils in various ways through their very methodology, nota-

bly by training the pupils to become aware of the preconceptions lurking in their interactions and to consider how these preconceptions are formed). Furthermore, since "the very nature of religious thought" is an "engagement with ultimate questions" (139), dialogical religious education is an ideal forum for the development of dialogue and negotiation skills.

While the interpretative-dialogical approach explored so far resonates with the discussion on intercultural education discussed in ch. 2, it nonetheless maintains a peculiar focus on the subjective dimension of the pupils which necessarily imply epistemological consequences in the didactic transposition of the *savoirs savants* of reference. We have seen how Jackson explicitly draws from various scholarly sources, authors from the study of religion\s (Smith, Waardernburg) from social sciences (notably Geertz's critics), and from cultural criticism (notably Said). Indeed, discussing teachers' training, Jackson argues that they should have a training in the study of religion\s especially in order to have a grasp of the "debates about the representation of religions in Western literature since the European Enlightenment", as well as a training that allows them to exercise "flexibility in approaching debates about 'cultures', 'ethnic groups' and 'communities'" (Jackson 2009, 410).

However, according to Jackson, RE as a subject does not reduce itself to a 'fixed body of knowledge'. This is because it features a peculiar "integration of the personal and the social" and therefore involves a series of

existential and social debates in which pupils are encouraged to participate, with a personal stake related to their own developing sense of identity. (Jackson 2004, 17-18)

We see such a stance in the way Jackson engages with anthropology as the main *savoir* of reference. We might understand the above discussed concepts of *interpretation* and *reflexivity* as an attempt to didactically transpose the *forma mentis* (cf. above, § 2.2.3) of the (hermeneutical) anthropology, especially for what concerns the methodological side (*interpretation*) and the self-reflection side (*reflexivity*). However, there are some differences in how this *forma mentis* works between anthropology as *savoir savant* and the *savoir scolaire* created by Jackson.

From the point of view of anthropology as *savoir savant*, we may affirm, to put it bluntly, that this discipline is primarily concerned with the production of knowledge, descriptive as well as explicative, empirical as well as theoretical, concerning a quite broad object of enquiry: "human society and behaviour" (Scupin 2016, 112). Let us try to draw here a parallel between anthropology as a *savoir savant* and Jackson's concepts of *representation* (that is, the threefold ma-

trix), *interpretation* and *reflexivity*. Anthropology has been producing descriptive, propositional knowledge about religions (*representation*), through appropriate method (*interpretation*). Anthropological thinking has also been focused on issues of self-reflection, such as the already mentioned insight from Leach and Turner (*reflexivity*). It underwent even further process of self-review, engendered by the theoretical developments of deconstructionism, post-modernism and post-colonialism (Erickson, Murphy 2016, 222-50).

However, these self-reflections and self-criticisms in anthropology were mainly focused on epistemology, on research ethics, and on broad political and ethical questions relating to issues of power, representation and inequality (which Jackson nonetheless acknowledges). Much less space has been devoted to subjective reflections on personal matters.[30]

We have seen, instead, that for Jackson *reflexivity* is also meant to "help each pupil to identify with and argue for a particular religious or non-religious position" and "find their own positions within the key debates about religious plurality" (Jackson 2005, 6). We have also seen how this re-elaboration of the self-reflective insights from anthropology relates to the attainment target of 'learning from religion'. Indeed, as other scholars have commented (Grelle 2009, 466-7; Jensen 2010, 74), in Jackson's RE, as well as in English RE in general, although there is a distinction between 'learning about religion', 'learning from religion' and religious nurture (in the sense of trans-

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[30] To be fair, the post-modern skepticism on the value-free objectivity of sciences, and of social sciences in particular, engendered a process for the rethinking of ethnographic method, with particular concern for the subjectivity of the researcher and the influence of her/his personal and socio-cultural background (cf. Aull Davies 1999, 3-26; Olivier de Sardan 2014, 103-33). Certain theoretical developments saw the (inevitable) subjective dimension of any ethnographic inquiry as a resource, instead of an obstacle, and proposed the method of autoethnography, which seeks to "describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)" (Ellis, Adams, Bochner 2011, 1). Now, subjective reflexivity in general has typically been invoked in the function of buttressing the scientific project of the social sciences (Bourdieu 2004, 85-115). However, some advocates of autoethnography, especially of the one called 'evocative autoethnography', explicitly argue for a blurring of the borders between scientific, artistic and even therapeutic dimensions (Ellis, Adams, Bochner 2011, 39). These trends, as well as their excessive focus on subjectivity in general, have been the object of several critiques. For example, Remotti (2014) laments how such 'post-modernist intoxication' led to an excessively solipsistic and self-referential anthropology. Olivier de Sardan bluntly states that, since the object of inquiry of social sciences is already complex, there is "no need to go overboard by transforming the field into an opportunity for redemption, conversion, revolution, fusion, salvation, or psychotherapy" (Olivier de Sardan 2014, 131). In the field of the study of religion\s, one of the most famous examples of ethnographic work in which the enquiry toward the object of research crosses and overlaps with an analysis on the subjectivity of the researcher herself is *Mama Lola* (McCarthy Brown 1991), where the author ends by becoming a practitioner herself. Cf. Strenski (2015, 203-4) for a critique of her epistemological choices.

mission of religious knowledge, but not necessarily inculcation or indoctrination), these borders are often "intentionally blurred" (Grelle 2009, 467). This is because of a lingering general idea that learning about religions and learning into one's own religion actually *are* and *can be* complementary (cf. Jackson 1997, 4) in a positive sense. In other words, since pupils, through *interpretation* must 'build bridges' towards foreign practices or concept by resorting to their own personal experience, such personal experience may well be of a religious nature, and since pupils are expected to rethink such experience in front of diversity, all of this process actually becomes a (welcomed) self-religious exploration.

To sum up, the *forma mentis* of the scholarly disciplines of reference has a more 'outward-looking' dimension (i.e. description and explanation of human behavior connected with religion), since the 'inward looking' dimension is primarily subordinated to check epistemological, ethical and political issues of the former. In the case of Jackson, the 'inward looking dimension' also touching the personal sphere has as equal a weight as the 'outward looking' dimension, and the two are seen as complementary (cf. Jackson 1997, 138).

This appears to have some consequences in terms of didactic transposition, especially concerning methods and theories peculiar to the study of religion\s. For example, even if Jackson builds his proposal on a robust base of scholarly works, he recommends avoiding an "axiomatic secular humanist interpretation of religion" (139) which is an ambiguous statement that may have at least two meanings. In one case it may mean that religions, *in truth*, ('axiomatic'), are manmade phenomena ('humanist'), and must be relegated to the private sphere ('secular'). In the other case it may mean that religions are to be studied and explained *exclusively as if* ('axiom') they are manmade phenomena ('humanist'), avoiding judgement of truth or falsity relative to their theological claims ('secular'). The first case is an ideological position, the second one is no other than the methodological postulate of the study of religion\s. On a similar vein, Jackson also recommends a "sensitive application of academic methods and standards" that should be furthermore open to "critical scrutiny of commentators within religious and secular traditions" (Jackson 1997, 140). Analogously, to find a balance between "sources reflecting the understanding of different academic disciplines" and "those representing the perception of different kinds of insiders" is recommended (140). In this sense is revealing the lack of details about the place and weight, within the learning paths of the pupils, of the theoretical inquiry on the concept of religion in itself. In other words, even if Jackson holds a quite precise idea on what counts to be a re-

ligion[31] (cf. previous section), and recommends training in the study of religion\s for RE teachers, we are left wondering how pupils should be made able to reach similar ideas through engagement with the theoretical study of religion\s, and if such a body of knowledge should be considered as a guidance only for teachers or as theoretical and methodological knowledge to be transmitted to pupils too.

From a pragmatical point of view, such ambiguities in Jackson's stance towards the academic study of religion\s may be explained as a practical move to ensure a safe space in which non-religious and (especially) religious pupils may explore their personal religious/existential issues in a climate of respect and mutual learning (cf. CoE 2014, 47-59). Most probably, the pivotal issue remains the safeguarding of the motivation and of the involvement of pupils in RE, who need to be personally and existentially engaged. All of this, of course, assuming but not conceding that purely academic methods may be detrimental for the aims of ensuring safe space for dialogue and maintaining motivation towards the subject.

Turning our attention to O'Grady, even if the status of *savoir savant* concerning religions *vis-à-vis* his RE proposal is not explicitly addressed, we are safe to affirm that his perspective does not differ from Jackson's. His approach is strongly dialogical in its methodology also, i.e. that contents, methods and techniques are co-planned with the pupils and arranged on the basis of their feedback on motivation and engagement. Thus, the reference to a *savoir savant* such as the study of religion\s, exemplified by the work of Ninian Smart, seems conceived more as a resource for the teacher. That is, knowledge aimed only at providing the teacher with the essential vocabulary and conceptual guidance in order to be an informed facilitator, while most of the knowledge about religion to be acquired by the pupil is, in last analysis, to be gained through interaction and engagement with the personal views of their peers. Indeed, O'Grady puts both the level of acquisition of propositional contents and the "personal and social development" (O'Grady 2019, 196) gained through such interaction on the same level, while adding that "performance assessment", i.e. the measurement of the level of attainment of a well-define corpus of knowledge, is detrimental for RE (198). Especially in regard to the issue of the methodological postulates of the study of religion\s, such as methodological agnosticism, we should take note of the following: O'Grady, in responding to criticism of his approach, concerning the "possible risk", of "failure to deal with the sacred" by the pupils (180), does not respond, as a scholar of religion\s would, that dealing in these terms with an essentialized, *sui generis* con-

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

cept is outside the scope of the discipline. Instead, he assures that his approach does not entail such a risk, and accepts the recommendation of giving due attention to the *peculiarities* of theological language (cf. 161-5, 180-2).

4.5.4   Evaluation and Criticism

The first observation is about the potential of Jackson's matrix on three 'levels': individual, membership group(s) and tradition at large. The dialectical interplay, including power-related dynamics, between these three levels is a convincing strategy to elucidate the internal diversity, complexity and fuzziness of borders within a given tradition, especially if compared with the modality of representations proposed by the other approaches. Indeed, we have seen, regarding the textbook on Hinduism, that the selection of topics offers a fairly equilibrated representation of a religious tradition, without excessive focus on the 'usual suspects' such as doctrines and texts. What is missing here is the notions that at the level of individuals there may be overlaps of different religious traditions, that at the level of membership groups and traditions at large may be interactions and borrowings (cf. above, § 3.2.1), and in general the notion of historical change and contextualization (cf. §§ 3.2.2 and 3.3). Nonetheless, the kernel of the idea is still valid, and I do not see any difficulty in incorporating these missing parts.

On a more educational level, also Jackson's idea of *reflexivity* may be seen as highly consistent with the disciplinary and educational components of the kind of RE we are envisioning. *Reflexivity* involves *constructive criticism*, i.e. to develop a critical stance towards one's own learning methods in order to identify possible biases in their representation, as well as those present in the material studied. Another component is *edification*, i.e. the re-assessment of one's own worldview through the challenge of 'unpacking' the worldviews of others. These processes are clearly pivotal in the development of a critical self-reflection on the dominant ideas concerning religion in general and Japanese and other Asian religions in particular, especially for what concerns the exploration of 1) those aspects of East-Asian religions that go against the grain of euro-centric ideas of religions and 2) the historical-cultural reasons for current (mis)representations of East-Asian religions.

However, we have also seen the peculiarly strong concern of the interpretative-dialogical approach in fostering pupil's motivation and personal involvement. These latter are stimulated by presenting the religions to be studied through the voices and experiences of other children, by considering pupils' religious experience themselves as study material and, furthermore, by making pupils the co-planners

of the RE curricula. In other words, what I find puzzling is Jackson and O'Grady's stance when treating the *reflexivity*-related processes as eminently "personal to the student" (Jackson 2008, 175), and their attempt to combine critical reflection on epistemological, ethical and political issues, with personal issues of religious/existential/identity-related nature. This problem is further highlighted by an ambiguous stance towards a *sui generis* concept of religion. We have seen that O'Grady holds theological and 'sacred' dimensions as important, that Jackson suggests avoiding 'insensitive' humanistic approaches, and that in general the idea of discussing religions in RE as 'truth-claims' is seen as not problematic.

All these ambiguities can be linked to the already cited problem of combining the aim of 'learning about religion' with the ambivalent aim of 'learning from religion'. More generally, we must acknowledge that in RE there is a tricky relationship between what Alberts (2007, 307-9) calls the *descriptive* and *existential* dimensions.

This strong interest of Jackson and O'Grady in issues of motivation and personal involvement can be discussed through a comparison with a similar key feature in Swedish RE, which explicitly foregrounds the issue with a pedagogical device called 'life questions pedagogy' (Alberts 2007, 222 ff.; Berglund 2013), inscribed in the institutional provisions for RE. In a few words, life questions (Sw. *livsfrågor*) are supposed to address the basic conditions for human life and of life in general. Examples of questions are:

> What is the meaning of life? What happens after death? Who are you and how would you like to be as a person? What is morally right?

> [...] Life questions are supposed to be posed by the students to different religious traditions and outlooks of life, as well as to themselves. Through studying different religions and outlooks on life, the students should then try to find the answers to these questions in the religion they are studying, the underlying idea being that this would bring about understanding for different religions, but that it could also contribute to the students' own ideas about her or his life. The life questions are understood to be universally human. (Berglund 2013, 178)

Berglund, while acknowledging the possible advantages in terms of pupil involvement through this kind of pedagogy, nonetheless finds several critical issues. First, these questions clearly focus on existential/inner dimension, which betrays a Christian-Protestant root, especially Lutheran-Christian creation theology. Secondly, the universality of these life questions cannot so simplistically be regarded as given. And even in the cases in which it would be possible to find answers to these questions among different religious traditions, the

weight and *relevance* of these questions and answers would clearly differ, even within the same tradition. Thirdly, to look at religions through the lens of *livsfrågor* runs the serious risk of creating stereotyped representations (178-81). These criticisms are perfectly consistent with our discussions and observations about the risk of rhetoric on the universality of the dimension of spirituality and of related 'existential' issues, which is, in reality, a contemporary development of the – modern and Christian idea – of the universality of religion (cf. above, §§ 2.1.5, 2.1.8 and 3.2.4). We have already seen how this idea strongly influences the conceptualization of the aims and contents of RE, as our critiques of the instrumental-existential approach have shown.

On the bases of these observations, we may observe that, if we want to provide a fair, complex account of religious traditions, especially of the Japanese and the other Asian traditions, the idea of linking the personal questions and concerns of pupils may be a seriously conflictual operation. Let us recall our discussion of the creation of 'models' (§ 2.2.5), those stratification of mental images in the minds of the pupils which may became so elaborated and strong as to resist further updates and subsume any new inputs. This is linked to the notion of epistemological obstacles, the knowledge which, in the evolution of key concepts within a discipline, have been useful or effective in that particular moment, but that is of no use when conceptualizing more advanced information. This is the case, for example, with the intuitive notion of the 'sacred' common to any religion that we found in the phenomenological phase of the study of religion\s. Brusseau (2002) warns us about the likelihood that pupils will probably face hindrances similar to those encountered in the historical evolution of the discipline. In addition to strictly *epistemological* obstacles, our exploration of the dynamics and stratification of self- and hetero-representations between 'East' and 'West' (§ 3.3) warns us also about the legacy of these historical processes, which are still in motion (§ 3.3.4), and thus exert their influence on pupils' models.

In fact, it is reasonable to think that many pupils will expect, in the context of RE, the implementation of an inner dimension-centered paradigm of religions. Therefore, if they are actively invited to relate to the religious material through their existential questions, this will reinforce the 'model' of knowledge about religion that works with this inner dimension-paradigm, whose supposedly universal and existential relevance conceals instead its Protestant origins. If the implicit expectations of pupils are not discussed in a propaedeutical manner, it may well be that cognitive conflict will rise when they are presented e.g. with those aspect of East-Asian religions discussed in § 3.2. I wonder if any teacher would invite an adolescent European pupil to personally relate to the practice of paying Buddhist monks to perform rituals aimed at obtaining success in business. In the worst-case

scenario, this could be interpreted, just like we have seen in § 3.3, as a degeneration of authentic Buddhism and not worthy of interest. If we were to follow O'Grady's recommendations to plan the contents of RE lesson taking the interests of the pupils as guidelines, it may be that we will find ourselves in a dilemma: should we avoid certain topics because they are 'boring' or non-relevant to the pupils' personal concerns? Or should we tackle exactly this kind of content because of the intercultural value of discovering that certain things can be relevant to others but not to us, and asking ourselves why? I would suggest, of course, the second option.

4.6   Conclusion

In this chapter we have briefly explored the historical and institutional context of English RE and then focused in detail on the different ways of theorizing and practicing RE as proposed by six authors which I have regrouped in three strands: 'interpretative-dialogical', 'rational-theological', 'existential-instrumental' in order to highlight some common and predominant traits.

Concerning the historical context, we have seen how the religious organizations had traditionally maintained a certain bond with RE, even after the 1988 Act, which changed the 'instructional', 'catechetical' aims of the former RE towards a more educational one. As a matter of fact, England RE is to be seen more as having a multi-faith education instead of a strictly secular, non-confessional subject (cf. Alberts 2007, 294). As a matter of fact, contents of the syllabus are, at least in theory, to be drafted by local religious representatives and educational stakeholders in the context of the SACREs, with a privileged position of the Church of England as stakeholder and Christianity as a topic.

Indeed, this ambiguity between non-confessional and multi-confessional can be seen in the two often cited attainment targets of 'learning about religion' and 'learning from religion'. In the first case it is clear that the expected educational outcome is an increase and a refinement of the knowledge base. In the second case, however, we have seen how the expected outcomes may vary among the authors discussed, depending often on other factors, such as the conception of religion or the social practices of reference. The 'learning from' aim is further linked with the general educational aim of the promotion of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Here the word 'spiritual' plays, in my view, a pivotal role in allowing a very broad interpretation of what pupils should learn *from* religion. We have seen, in fact, that interpretations of this learning outcome vary and may involve questions of a more 'theological-philosophical' character, such as "about the meaning and purpose of life, beliefs about

God, ultimate reality, issues of right and wrong and what it means to be human" (RE Council 2013, 14; cf. above, § 4.2.2), as well as more personal or existential issues such as "questions of identity and belonging, meaning, purpose and truth, and values and commitments" (QCA 2004, 11; cf. § 4.2.2). This intersection of the theological plane with the 'experiential' one can be seen in those developments of RE during the 1980s, which Wright and Barnes accuse of having a covert "liberal protestant theological agenda", i.e. of promoting the idea that there is common experiential 'truth' in all religions beyond the various conflicting doctrines (cf. § 4.3.2).

We have also seen that the Commission on Religious Education (CoRe; cf. above, § 4.2.2) put forth some quite innovative suggestions, such as excluding the religious communities from the direct creation of a so-called 'National Entitlement for RE', and reinforcing the academic weight, both in the sense of the type of experts involved, and in the sense of the theoretical and epistemological recommendations. One of the striking differences this report has in respect to previous documents is a robust theoretical framework on how religions and worldviews in general should be conceived. At present, it seems that the government is not interested in following the report recommendations.[32]

The absence, in the 2004 and 2013 documents, of a theoretical framing or definition of religion may explain in part the varieties of approaches to RE. In fact, they do not vary only at the level of 'learning from', but also for what concerns the 'learning about' dimension, which we have analyzed through the three dimensions of conceptualization, representation and epistemology of religion.

For Wright and Barnes religion is to be better conceived as a set of truth-claims, systematically connected among them, concerning the ultimate nature of things. Therefore, the type of enquiry proposed as the best suited is the philosophical-theological one, especially directed to doctrinal texts (§ 4.3.2). Erricker and Hannam propose other different ways of conceiving religion: a set of interrelated conceptual key terms, or a division between holding propositional beliefs, performing practices and applying an existential modality (§ 4.4.2). Furthermore, their proposal is less concerned with *what religion is* from an *objective-scientific point of view*, and more with *how religion should be studied* by pupils from an *educational point of view* (§ 4.4.3). Jackson proposes his three-layered matrix of individual/membership

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[32] However, it should be noted that this document sparked, in these very last years, new interesting research perspectives in English RE, which are becoming more and more receptive of SoR insights (cf. O'Grady 2022). Nonetheless, voices against these new positions have also been raised (cf. Barnes 2022). I have not been able to duly engage with these developments here as I was finalizing this book for publication, but I am to analyse them in a forthcoming article.

group(s)/larger tradition and stresses that studying 'religion', just like 'culture', means addressing complex phenomena, with internal differentiations, whose borders furthermore, are fuzzy, shifting and negotiated (§ 4.5.2). Socio-anthropological approaches are then suggested as the best suited epistemological paradigms, and representations of real-life expression of religions are preferred (§ 4.5.3).

We have also seen how different conceptions of religions work in tandem with different educational perspectives. For Wright and Barnes RE should be conductive to a rational and critical evaluation of the various truth-claims of the various religions, so that pupils may become more conscious religious (or non-religious) practitioners, and, especially for Barnes, may draw guidance accordingly from the relevant sources for their ethical behavior (§ 4.3.3). With Erricker and Hannam, we have seen how the educational perspective is of paramount importance. For the former, RE should not only be concerned with the cognitive aspect of grasping, interpreting and evaluating the key concepts of the various religious traditions, but should also foster an engagement with such concepts at the personal level, in order for the pupils to develop their own spiritual narratives. For Hannam, instead, since she considers the existential way of being religious as the functional equivalent of leading an active political life in the public sphere, RE should expose pupils to such a way of being religious that it may be meaningful and inspiring to them in both religious, educational and political sense (§ 4.4.3). For Jackson and O'Grady, RE is meant to foster the capacity to interpret different forms of (religious) life in the pupils, moving back and forth between their perspectives and those of the 'others' (be they insiders portrayed in textbook or other classmates), so that their own background may come to be seen in a different light. All of this process should be conductive to a dialogical attitude which, especially for O'Grady, motivates and empowers pupils and helps the development of intercultural and citizenship competences (§ 4.5.3).

These main differences notwithstanding, we can say that certain themes run through all the approaches discussed. The most evident one is the concern for the 'learning from' attainment target which, albeit in different fashions, is addressed by each author when they consider the effects at various levels of encountering different religions to the personal development of the pupil. Not only, therefore, is this peculiar to Erricker and Hannam, but also Jackson and O'Grady are keen to actively help pupils in the construction of their cultural and religious identity, by linking religious material to their existential questions and fostering in this way their motivation, involvement and – in the case of O'Grady – also responsibility in being the co-planners of their own education. The same may apply to Wright and Barnes as well, who are more interested in having each pupil make critical and reasoned choice about her/his own set of beliefs, so as to lead an 'authentic' religious life.

Another common trait may be also found in the conception of religion. Notwithstanding the strong differences in the theoretical treatment (or non-treatment) of religion, some key words like transcendence, metaphysical truths or fundamental existential and ethical issues appear as a common, distinctive features of religion in all the authors. To be fair, in Erricker and Hannam, these key words are more nuanced towards an idea of immanently-oriented religiosity, with strong personal and existential tones, and often conceived as 'spirituality'.

We have critically commented on these aspects on the grounds of the arguments explored in the previous chapters. Wright and Barnes' approach to religions has been showed as being profoundly influenced by a Protestant-Christian paradigm of religion, with strong emphasis on the creedal dimension, doctrinal texts and discreteness between religious traditions which are understood as coherent and rational systems of thought and practice. Therefore, it is clearly incompatible with the complexity of the theme of Japanese and other Asian religions which, – we have seen in the previous chapter – have many traits that explicitly challenge the Protestant-Christian paradigm of religion. Their baseline educational perspective of enabling a self-conscious religious (or anti-religious) individual to decide which beliefs are truer than others is also at odds with our chosen intercultural frame, according to which cultural/religious differences are not to be engaged as monolithic, and the awareness of the contingency of our point of view – in this case, of its modern and Christian origins – is pivotal.

Erricker and Hannam's approach to religions have been criticized also because they excessively subordinate the epistemological approach to religions in their educational goals. Errickers's focus on conceptual elements, in order to provide pupils with 'building blocks' to both understand a religious worldview and to construe their own ones, actually results in representations of religions, especially East-Asian ones, as a sort of 'wisdom' or 'rarefied spirituality'. This clearly shows the influence of the long history of orientalist and self-orientalist representations of these traditions, as well as the contemporary discourse on the superiority of 'spirituality' *versus* established religions. This is even more conspicuous in Hannam, who explicitly affirms that the existential mode of religiosity, represented by modern (and often Christian) philosophers such as Simone Weil, is the best way to address religions, especially Buddhism and Hinduism. From an intercultural perspective, this is a clear hegemonic projection of modern Euro-American ideals and conceptualizations towards East-Asian religions. Furthermore, this hinders a self-critical understanding of those historical influences at the root of this attitude towards molding religious and cultural difference into one's own desires and neglecting the elements as not fitting such desires.

We have detected a similar problem also in the interpretative-dialogical approach. While we have acknowledged the potential of the three-layered matrix of representations and noted how the idea of *constructive criticism* and *edification* resonates with our intercultural frame of reference, we also cast some doubts on how these processes may be totally compatible with a centrality of the pupils' needs and interests. In particular when this centrality is so pronounced, that making the pupils co-planner of RE lessons is suggested. These doubts are based on the observations that pupils' needs, interests, reasons for motivation and, above all, models of understanding 'religion' and, especially, East-Asian religions, will be likely informed by a modern and orientalist understanding of them. Therefore, this somehow runs against our ideas of exploring those aspects of Japanese and other Asian religions in order to deconstruct this very contemporary understanding and opening space for intercultural and self-critical reflections.

We have concluded our close-reading examination of the main RE approaches in England and have seen how the theme of Japanese and East-Asian religions has been a useful lens in showing how an alleged non-confessional RE has still many unresolved issues, concerning both their approach to the concept of religion in general and their approach to East-Asian religions in particular. This does not mean that there are not any positive insights to be gained. Starting from the ideas of the 2018 CoRe's report to Jackson's ideas on *representations* and *reflexivity*, there are elements on which we may capitalize. Similarly, the issue of the importance of the motivation and the personal expectations of the pupils, particularly strong in O'Grady but present in different form in all the authors explored, should not be easily dismissed. Instead, it is a factual element that we should address in relation with our aims to provide a balanced representation of East-Asian religions, an understanding of the issues at stake when talking about 'religion', and a sensibilization towards themes of intercultural and democratic coexistence.

In order to do this, we need to recapitulate what we have discussed so far in a systematized manner and add further insights by other SoR scholars who addressed the topic of SoR-based RE. By doing so, I will try to propose a sort of model for teaching Japanese and East-Asian Religions that may offer an orientational map of interconnected key points, both theoretical and practical, articulated at various levels: axiological/educative, epistemological, teaching-oriented and learning-oriented.