Religion, Education, and the 'East'
Addressing Orientalism and Interculturality in Religious Education
Through Japanese and East Asian Religions
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5 Towards a Model for Teaching Japanese and Other East-Asian Religions

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5.1   Use and Limits of the Concept of 'Model'

In didactics, the concept of 'model' features a considerable level of polysemy. Baldacci, for example, understands this term as

> a simplified and stylized representation of reality, based on the selection and on the abstraction of a few aspects from it, and on the idealization of their relations. (Baldacci 2010, 27)

He attributes a descriptive function to it. Damiano also highlights its prescriptive function as he understands it as a

> simplified representation of operative frames aimed at realizing educative actions institutionalized in school. (Damiano 1993, 91)

Bonaiuti, Calvani and Ranieri further stress the prescriptive dimension by particularly referring to the cognitive paradigm-based sub-field called 'instructional design', in which 'model' is usually defined as a

> theory whose aims are to identify a set of adequate methods and procedures so that, given certain contextual conditions, learning will become more effective, efficient and appealing. Instruction models have situated, non-universal character and maintain at any rate a probabilistic nature. (Bonaiuti, Calvani, Ranieri 2017, 59)

Perla, trying to provide a synthesis of the various interpretations of this pervasive term in didactics, suggests first of all not to assume the model as a straightforward form of theory. It should be understood instead as a

> structure of mediation between theory and practice, which provides a simplified and partial representation of the didactic activity. (Perla 2013, 37)

Moreover, consistent with the general theoretical shift in the overarching paradigms from Cognitivism to Constructivism (cf. above, § 2.2.1), there is a rethinking of the pivotal role of model. Previously, it was considered a rigid structure created through the operation of logical inference, abstract problem-solving and technical rationality, and teachers were expected to follow it thoroughly in their planning and implementation of activities. According to recent developments, instead, this logic of technical rationality is sided, on one hand, with the logic of complexity, which implies non-linearity, circularity of procedures and interrelationships between elements of the didactic process (cf. Sarracino 2013). On the other hand, there is the acknowledgment of the influence of the implicit, practical knowledge of the teachers, which can hardly be codified in a model or theory. Accordingly, Damiano provides another definition of a model as a sort of orientation map, in the sense that it is a

> simplified representation of teaching actions aimed at signaling, through emphasis, those different aspects which, from time to time, are deemed relevant to the intention of who is producing the said model. (Damiano 2006, 164; translation slightly altered)

Furthermore, to our treatment of the concept of model it is useful to recall from above (§ 2.2.1) that it is not very useful to conceptualize the object of study of didactics, i.e. teaching learning, with a rigid substantial definition pointing to the 'ontological core' of the phenomenon. Indeed, it refers to different empirical realities: the *act* of teaching, the *content* to be taught, the teaching *relationship* between

persons, between persons and artifacts, teaching as *formal process*, teaching as *informal event*, and so on. Accordingly, Baldacci proposes to engage the notion of teaching as a 'function-concept', in the sense that an initially empty, purely abstract idea of teaching is put *in function* of various variables: "*teaching* (teacher, pupils, content, medium, action, context... x, y, z)" (Baldacci 2013, 29). In this sense, teaching became conceivable and analyzable once some of these variables are saturated. This means that teaching *in itself* does not exist, but it is always teaching *of something*, or/and teaching *to someone from someone*, in certain *contexts*, through certain *actions*, and so on. By saturing of a certain numbers of variables, the object of research became more or less specified. For example, the focus on the variables of persons, contexts and activities builds up the research object of general didactics, while the focus on the variables of contents and epistemologies builds up the research object of disciplinary didactics.

I draw from these reflections and I take in consideration a certain number of variables for my 'model' for teaching Japanese and East-Asian religions. It somehow recalls the scheme of didactic transposition discussed in the §§ 2.2.2 and 2.2.6. These variables – or better, classes of variables – are axiology/education, epistemology, teaching dimension and learning dimension, and are mutually interrelated. Not all variables, however, have the exact same weight.

We have seen (§ 2.2.6) how the axiological dimension, i.e. the choice of certain social practices of reference, implicitly or explicitly influences the choice and the modality of the didactic transposition of the *savoirs savants*. In this discussion of the axiological/educative variable, we should recall also the interrelationship between the acquisition and evaluation of types of competence typical of certain discipline or fields, which is primarily engaged by didactics, and the overall formation of the individual as a part of a society within the horizon of values, mindsets and behaviors deemed desirable by that society, which is primarily engaged by pedagogy (cf. above, § 2.2.1). Concerning this latter point, also the utopian character of the pedagogical discourse must be noted. That is, apart from being an analysis, a history and a critical reflection about the "essentially contested concept" of education (Biesta 2015, 256), the pedagogical discourse features an ideal, utopian dimension in that it also strives towards the creation of "feasible transformative paths for the existent, ideally projecting them in new places and worlds" (Frabboni, Pinto Minerva 2018, 18). This observation highlights the somehow arbitrary aspect of the axiological/educative variable, as it ultimately points towards an ideal vision of society which depend, indeed, on one or more *axioms*. Both words have in fact the same etymological Greek root of *axios*, 'valid, worth'.

This connection between axiology and axioms makes us aware that the epistemological variable too is not axiologically neuter and has

its degree of influence concerning the social practices of relevance, as well as a certain degree of implicit ethics. The disciplines themselves, including the case the study of religion\s, may have their own relevance to society. Moreover, within a same discipline, axioms, paradigms and, above all, findings and conclusions are not necessarily coherent nor homogenized (cf. ch. 1 *passim*). Therefore, certain social practices of relevance may be favored while other may be or undermine and excluded, on the base of the chosen premises. To provide a quick example, the deconstructionist trend of the study of religion\s automatically excludes a RE whose social practice concern the interreligious dialogue aimed at discovering that we are fundamentally referring to a single, common 'Truth'.

In the context of the present research, we must include within the epistemological variable a fixed, arbitrary element, i.e. the topic of Japanese and East-Asian religious traditions. This choice is in turn linked to the axiological choice too since, as I have anticipated in the introduction, it is my hypothesis that this topic is a pivotal (albeit not exclusive) element in providing RE with an inclusive and self-reflective pedagogical framework, characterizable as intercultural and global citizenship education.

The other two variables, teaching and learning dimensions, are somehow more dependent – but not completely – from the previous two. They indeed represent the more practical and operative aspects which we are interested in developing more in detail. However, these dimensions involve certain pivotal processes, such as the transformation from a *savoir savant* to a *savoir scolaire*, the identification of its foundational nuclei, its learning objectives, the possible misconceptions of the learner, and so on. It is true that, on one side, these elements depend on the epistemological variable for their content, but, on the other, they also 'act' on the epistemological variable. In fact, they *change* the *savoir savant* from being 'simply' knowledge into: 1) knowledge to be taught; 2) knowledge taught; and 3) knowledge learned (cf. above, § 2.2.2). They do this on two bases: the intrinsic logic in these processes, developed by the reflections of general didactics, and in relation to the overarching axiological variable.

Based on the reflections above, in what follows I will develop a 'model' for teaching Japanese and East-Asian religions in the form of a discussion and highlight of those particular aspects, their interrelationship and the theoretical and practical outcomes of said interrelationship. Such outcomes, I will argue, are relevant and consistent to the chosen axiological variable and epistemological variable. In other words, I will saturate the variables in the dimension of axiology, epistemology, teaching and learning.

Consistent with the 'soft' notion of model above discussed, I do not intend to present it as a ready-to-use method, nor as a sort of a comprehensive 'theory of teaching Japanese and East-Asian religions'. I rather think of it as is a sort of orientation map that highlights some pivotal aspects and knots, but also as a conceptual toolkit with various insights, some more theoretical, others more practical, accompanied, when possible, with some operative examples.

In developing each of these dimensions I will briefly recapitulate what has been discussed in the previous chapters and add additional insights and remarks from the work of those scholars, coming from the field of the study of religion\s, who have devoted their research to the establishment of normative, operative criteria for implementing a SoR-based RE. Given the logical preeminence of the axiological dimension, I will start from it, and it will be also the occasion to present and discuss what I deem as a useful reference model for what concerns the notion, and the implementation of, intercultural and citizenship education. Thereafter, I will discuss the dimensions of epistemology, of teaching, and of learning, in a progression which is consistent with the didactic transposition theory. That is, from the noosphere, where the *savoir savants* are chosen and reworked on the base of the social practice of reference and of the overarching values frame, to the actual application in school practice and, finally, to contexts and situations concerning the learning processes of the pupils. However, as we have just seen, due to the mutual interrelationship between these dimensions, a seemingly linear argumentation will be punctuated by several cross-references.

5.2   The Axiological/Educative Dimension

5.2.1   Recapitulation and Further Insights

We may well begin by reviewing which kind of, we may say, *axia paiedia* or worthwhile education is implicitly or explicitly upheld by the various practices and knowledge discussed so far. For the reasons explained above in § 4.1, we choose the English RE as case study to be analyzed and discussed. In general, we can say that English RE has been transformed, in front of the developing processes of immigration, multiculturality and secularization, from a transmission to religious belief to a (allegedly) non-confessional education aimed towards the understanding of and coping with different religions, and their impact on society. Two overall objectives have been established: 'learning about religion' and 'learning from religion' – which in turn refer to the general educational norm concerning the promotion of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. These two

objectives have been variously articulated and interpreted both in institutional documents as well as in individual RE theoretical and methodological proposals (cf. §§ 4.2.1 and 4.2.2).

The 2004 *Non-statutory National Framework* and the 2013 *National Review* address various social, intercultural and citizenship-related competences, such as resolving conflicts concerning religious and ethical issues, being sensitive to others' ideas and feelings, critically evaluating varied points of view in the perspective of community cohesion, and valuing difference as an asset for common good. We saw how in English RE there is the general conviction that, to reach such objectives, apart from mere learning about religions, what is needed is also learning from religion, conceived in the sense of a certain kind of reflection of theological and existential nature, which address the learners at the personal level. For example, engaging 'ultimate questions' (e.g. "is God real?", "why are we alive?") (QCA 2004, 14), responding creatively to issues of belonging, meaning, purpose and truth (cf. RE Council 2013, 25) and ultimately being more 'confident' and 'positive' about one's own religious (or non-religious) identity and ideas (cf. § 4.2.2). We have seen how this idea of personally involving the pupils in reflections of theological and existential nature is an important element all of the RE approaches analyzed in detail.

For Wright and Barnes, the educative value of RE consists, first of all, in addressing in a critical manner certain contemporary perspectives concerning religious pluralism. These perspectives, which posit an inner, experiential common ground of all religions, are deemed shallow and ultimately belonging to certain currents of Liberal Protestantism. Against this imposition of a false fluid identity over the differences between the various religious traditions – which favors, moreover, an individualistic attitude nurtured in the 'cult of the individual' – RE should instead be conductive to a rational and critical evaluation of the various truth-claims of different religions, so that a pupil may be a more conscious religious (or non-religious) practitioner. Barnes adds also the ability of drawing, in accord to these reflections, relevant guidance for his/her ethical behavior (§ 4.3.3)

Concerning Erricker and Hannam, the educative value of RE consists, first of all, to take advantage of religious pluralism in order to address the personal, spiritual and existential development of the individual. For Erricker, RE should not only concern itself with the cognitive aspects of grasping the key concepts of the various religions and applying them in the interpretation and evaluation of various religious phenomena. It should also foster an engagement with such concepts even at the personal level, to enable pupils to develop their own spiritual narrative, free from constrains of other hegemonic meta-narratives that come both from institutional traditions and from liberalism and its (allegedly) universal principles. For Hannam, instead, since she considers the existential way of being reli-

gious equivalent to or at least conductive towards an active political life in the public sphere, RE should expose pupils to such modalities of being religious. Existential dimensions of religions are supposed to be meaningful to pupils, and inspire them in both religious, educational and political sense (§ 4.4.3).

We have criticized these educational perspectives since they go against the fundamental premises of the educational perspective assumed by the present work, which draws from theories and concepts of intercultural education and basically aims to enable pupils to navigate through intercultural diversity. This latter must not be conceived as a set of separate, monolithic blocks called 'cultures', 'nations', 'social groups', and so on, but as a field of complex intercultural interactions between fuzzy borders that take place at many levels, and in which political, economic and other power-related factors are integral elements.

Wright and Barnes, with their aim of enabling pupils to discern which religious doctrines are more rational, coherent or appropriate for them, inevitably rule out the possibility of exploring the pivotal topics of socio-cultural complexities and the fuzziness within religious traditions, between religious traditions, and between religious traditions and other dimensions of human thought and behavior. This goes against the idea of multi-perspectivity in the sense of getting a nuanced understanding of reality from different points of view and types of sources (§ 4.3.4).

In other words, we highlighted the naivety of uncritically focusing on the (alleged) religious 'spiritual' existential needs of contemporary pupils living in a Western country, because it necessary entails a projection of modern, Christian-centric ideas about 'religion' and 'spirituality', and raises further the risk of orientalist understanding of other religious traditions, especially the East-Asian ones. This is particularly conspicuous in Hannam and Erricker. Their overall educational goal is the development of an existential/spiritual dimension, which is ultimately an emic, modern, Euro-American idea passed off as a universal constant. This obviously does not help pupils to acknowledge their possible biases, presuppositions and assumptions at works when exploring Japanese and other East-Asian traditions, especially their pre-modern history. Actually, it risks hindering those entangled histories, often with power-related aspects, through which, for example, Hinduist or Daoist traditions shifted from being despised as magical superstitions to being praised as spiritual remedies for the contemporary world (§ 4.4.4).

However, there are also insightful elements to be considered. We have seen how the CoRe 2018 report *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward* introduces quite innovative ideas in the field of RE, and the educative value of RE come to be more focused on a set of general transferable skills, which are more or less intrinsic to the disciplines

involved in the academic study of religion\s. Broadly speaking, the RE upheld in this document should foster, through a thoughtful engagement with the complexities of the phenomenon of 'religion', the following competences: individuating biases and stereotypes; careful listening; critical thinking; self-reflection; open mindedness; representing views other than one's own with accuracy; respectful critique of beliefs and positions, especially in controversial issues. Outcomes related to the aim of 'learning from religion' are not completely dismissed, but are framed in sober, less 'theological' terms. Briefly, these are: to be able to understand the human quest for meaning; to articulate one's own position in this regard; to be prepared for life in a world featuring different answers to fundamental human questions (§ 4.2.2).

For Jackson and O'Grady, the educative value of RE consists in its capacity to positively address the present multicultural and multi-religious situation, by fostering in pupils the capacity to interpret different forms of (religious) life and to move back and forth between their perspective and those of the 'others' (be them insiders portrayed in textbooks or classmates). In this way, their own background may come to be seen in a different light. This is in particular the case of Jackson's process of *edification*, that is, the understanding of one's own worldviews through the process of 'unpacking' others' worldviews, of trying to relate them with one's own experience, and of discovering one's hidden preconceptions. All of this should be conductive to a dialogical attitude which, especially for O'Grady, motivates and empowers pupils and helps their development of intercultural and citizenship competences. The same process is also meant to help each pupil to identify with, and argue for, a particular religious or non-religious position. Pupils are invited to find their own positions concerning religious plurality through the exploration of both own and peers' personal religious/existential issues in a climate of respect and mutual learning (§§ 4.5.2 and 4.5.3). This centrality of the pupils' needs and interests – which for O'Grady is so pivotal that he suggests making the pupils co-planner of RE lessons – has been critically discussed on the basis that it may actually hinder a thorough self-critical reflections on deep-seated ideas concerning religion\s, especially when it comes to Japanese and East-Asian religions (§ 4.5.4). The issue of the motivation and personal involvement of the pupils remains still relevant, and will be tackled in connection with the learning dimension (cf. *infra* § 5.5).

Since the declared approach in this research is the academic study of religion\s, it is worth dwelling here on the reflections concerning the educational value of a RE explicitly based on this particular discipline. Moreover, this will also offer the occasion to explicitly address the following question: on which axiological/educational grounds should the study of religion\s be employed as the primary, if not the only one, epistemological base for RE?

Jensen (2008; 2017b; 2019) is one of the foremost scholars advocating a SoR-based RE. He has been particularly critical towards what he defines "small-c confessional RE", i.e. those approaches which, albeit presenting themselves as non-confessional, nonetheless implicitly or explicitly put forth the uncritical presumption of theism, thus promoting some postulated religious or spiritual dimension which is supposed to constitute a universal human and ontological fact. Upon critical analysis, however, this perspective reveals itself to be a crypto-Christian-Protestant one (Jensen 2017b). The core value of RE, instead, in front of the acknowledgment of religion as relevant social phenomena, exemplified but not limited to current issues of islamophobia or of coexistence in increasing complex religious pluralism, consists in its 'emancipatory knowledge'. This latter is formed by scientifically sound information and, more importantly, by analytical-critical tools, to be employed to critically analyse social reality in a rational and independent way. Objectives such as fostering tolerance are of secondary importance (Jensen 2008). The rationale is that in an open, democratic and plural society, space must be given to religions, anti-religious, and a-religious voices. Therefore, for the functioning of such a secular, but not 'secularist', society, what is needed is a second-order, analytical-critical discourse on religions (Jensen 2019). This is also the reason for the exclusive choice of the academic study of religion\s, notwithstanding the various internal critiques, especially concerning the very concept of religion (39 ff.; cf. above, § 2.1.3). Instead, processes typical of this discipline, such as being constantly self-aware, retooling one's own critical approach, engaging with human issues such as dynamics of social formation and identity construction, and so on, may well contribute to 'general education' (*Allgemeinbildung*) and other competences related to citizenship education (34 ff.).

Alberts (2007, 353 ff.) has similar arguments for the exclusive choice of the study of religion\s. The development of this discipline (cf. above, § 2.1) is characterized by a constant striving to reach a non-religious and impartial approach, which is not the 'truest', but the most objective in regard to both believers and non-believers. If the confessional approach endorses a negative pluralism, i.e. looking to other religions from a competitive perspective, and the 'theological' or 'small-c' approach endorses a hegemonic pluralism, i.e. subtly subsuming plurality under a specific perspective, the study of religion\s endorses instead a positive pluralism in that it engages the incommensurability of different worldviews with epistemological humility, methodological relativism and methodological agnosticism. This fundamental concern towards impartiality makes the study of religion\s the most appropriate approach, and avoids the risk that RE may be instrumentalized by any religious or anti-religious group. All of this is reflected in the overall educative value of this RE, which consists in its 'transformative' potential, i.e. the development of critical con-

sciousness, emancipation, and autonomy of judgment. For example, it promotes critical self-awareness of hidden assumption of religious nature, or challenges an allegedly monolithic notion of 'European religious/cultural heritage'. Moreover, for Alberts the emancipative role of RE may also consist of foregrounding the underlying general value framework, such as those of international agreements on human rights and democracy, under which all religious phenomena are to be scrutinized, exploring also historical nature and contested application of these very frameworks (cf. Alberts 2007, 360, 363). Additionally, the social responsibility as individuals is also addressed: Alberts sees fruitful connections between RE and intercultural education, as the two may be of mutual improvement in promotion of competence such as knowledge of the others and awareness of various cognitive, affective and behavioral issues involved in intercultural dynamics, such as the subtle mechanisms of otherization (362).

Giorda and Saggioro (2011; Giorda 2012), since their proposal takes the form of a subject identified as history of religions, discuss its educative value in a broad range of transversal competences. These are textual/semantic, philosophical-phenomenological, psychological and anthropological (this latter meaning the engagement with universal constants of humankind, e.g. the meaning-bestowing activity). On a more general level, this subject is part of the larger frames of interculturality (Giorda, Saggioro 2011, 170-9) and social and civic competences. This entails addressing the understanding of the legal aspects concerning religions in society and within religions themselves, or reflecting on topics of identity, conflicts and boundaries, especially in relation to ethical and religious debates in contemporary plural society (151-2). In a nutshell, its main goal should be

> developing a deep understanding and respect for beliefs and traditions of others, which can all make a contribution towards establishing a sense of solidarity and citizenship. (Giorda 2012, 111)

Notably, apart from the overall idea of helping pupils in making autonomous decision in cultural, social and political matters, the theme of personal development of the pupils, including their own quest for meaning, is not dismissed (Giorda, Saggioro 2011, 143). While reiterating the neutral position of the history of religions in this regard, among the desired outcomes is included also being able to reflect about one's own religious identity and religious experience, about the role of religions in one's own cultural development, and about the manifold existence of values and answers. This is also in consideration of the fact that involving personal experience may actively motivate the students (Giorda 2012, 116).

Frank (2013; 2016; Franck, Bleisch 2017) excludes instead any personal commitment of the learners, i.e. their quest for meaning, for

ethical models or for identity resources. The reasons are consistent with her views on the educational role of a RE based on the study of religion\s. Basically, the relevance of RE as school subject, and therefore to the society at large, is the promotion of the peaceful coexistence of people of different religious and ideological origins (Frank 2016, 23). This requires that all those involved in intercultural and interreligious situations should maintain a certain scientific distance from religious attitudes and rituals. Instead of making a 'personal use' of certain religious perspectives, one should be able, through observation and investigation, to put oneself "mentally in the place of people of different religious convictions as well as of atheists or people who are indifferent to religion" (Frank, Bleisch 2017, 75). This is what should ease the cohabitation between individuals and groups with different horizons. Given the strong emphasis (not absent in both Jensen and Alberts) of the principle of freedom both of and from religion, RE as school subject is meant to be part of a larger project of socialization into a common plural world, which must be accessible to all, not only to the 'life-worlds' (on Frank's 'life-worlds' cf. above, § 1.1) of a limited number of learners with religious sensibilities. Therefore, this common world is to be explored in terms of dynamics of religious socialization, representations, and communication, not for the sake of answering spiritual needs but for the sake of social education and in order to create conscious citizens (Frank 2013, 91).

It is useful at this point to also address the social/educational value that scholars have attributed to the study of religion\s in itself. It is argued (Tweed 2016; Antes 2017) that it is desirable to have a substantive knowledge regarding religious phenomena because, in increasingly multi-religious societies, critical cross-cultural situations can be expected in various instances. Examples can be found in economic areas, e.g. tourism, or in public utility, e.g. health care towards religionists who follow certain relevant behavior motivated by their traditions. From the point of view of social cohesion and security, it is argued that reliable, non-partisan information may provide pivotal knowledge in religious dynamics, both in itself and in relation to the various representations in public discourse. Such knowledge may prove useful in decision making. On a more individual-oriented level, the inherent striving of the study of religion\s towards understanding, and implicitly cherishing plurality, has transformative potentials. In fact, it may correct that 'blindness' we have in regard of the ways of being of people different from ourselves, through "making the familiar strange and making the strange familiar" (Tweed 2016, 809). Also, some scholars do not exclude the self-reflexive potential of the study of religion\s, as it may affect one's own religious belief or philosophy of life. Other scholars, instead, reject these considerations not only on an epistemological basis but also on a moral one. That is, to reduce religion to the individual inner sphere entails

neglecting all those critical interactions with society, politics, power and violence. This would end as an endorsement of the hegemonic notion of religion as a fundamentally 'spiritual' matter, coupled with the dangerous corollary that the material, practical or bodily aspects are instead a 'degeneration' from the 'real' religion. In this sense, we may well speak of an educative agenda within the deconstructionist trend in the study of religion\s, which we may be labeled "decolonization of knowledge" (Nye 2019, 8). We will further dwell on this.

5.2.2 Discussion and Proposal

Fundamentally, I side with the various scholars from the study of religion\s and their upholding of the principles of equality, of public secular institutions and freedom both of and from religion. This has the epistemological consequence of choosing a discipline that constantly endeavored to rethink itself, and continues to do so, in order to reach the most impartial point of view possible, with all its possible pitfalls and internal contestations.

At the same time, I am conscious that these principles, which, together with other pivotal contemporary principles such as human rights, democracy and rule of law, are historically and geographically determined concepts. Similarly, their universalization too is a matter of historical dynamics and it is still contested. We have seen, for example, how the concept of secularity has its peculiar history, intimately linked with the religious history of Europe and America (§§ 2.1.3 and 2.1.5), and how the dyad 'religion-secularity' has then been imposed to, but also tactically employed by, other civilizations (§§ 2.1.8 and 3.3.1). Similarly, Erricker highlights the dilemma of liberal pluralism which, while trying to accommodate ways of life different from itself, cannot renounce to certain principles. These latter are, for example, those of human rights and democratic process, which are not empirically universal principles, thus configuring liberal pluralism, strictly speaking, as a non-universal position (§ 4.4.3). This is a reminder that, even with a self-critical and neutral perspective, we cannot achieve an absolutely value-free teaching, especially in relation to RE.

This makes me reflect that, in an increasingly globalized, interconnected and even contested intercultural world (cf. above, §§ 2.2.7 and 2.2.8), it is pivotal to address the notion of negotiation among different horizons, and the importance of carefully reflecting about the degree of negotiability of one's own values, positions and assumptions (cf. above, § 2.2.8; Hardy, Hussain 2017; Mansuri, Arber 2017).

Therefore, I agree with Frank and her idea of RE as being fundamentally aimed at fostering cohabitation between individuals and groups with different horizons. In order to do so, RE must be framed,

as Jensen puts it, in a second-order discourse that, as Giorda and Saggioro suggest, should support learners in making conscious and autonomous decisions in relation to ethical, legal, political and cultural debates concerning religions. And for these decisions to be made, apart from reliable information, what is also needed is an analytical-critical approach towards religious phenomena, including their entanglements with other dimensions of society and their dynamics of self- and hetero-representation, of power and identity. Furthermore, the same approach should be translated into critical self-awareness, especially of those hidden assumptions concerning religions; in a nutshell, Alberts' idea of an emancipative role of RE.

At the same time, it is important to avoid the construction of imaginary 'walls' between religious, but also between anti-religious or non-religious groups and persons. This means, consequently, to avoid stereotypical, fixed characterization of these groups, which may well engender prejudices, discrimination, or even fear and conflicts. In order to do this, we have seen above (§ 2.2.7) a dynamic concept of culture (including in itself also the notion of religion) as a 'process' of creation, transmission and recreation of values, beliefs, practices and traditions, some of which may well be of recent invention. Individual choices and negotiations according to contextual needs and constraints are factors in these dynamics. Within seemingly coherent groups, they may well be internal and of contested variety. Individuals may draw, consciously or not, from different cultural resources or partake in different identity symbolisms.

On the basis of these considerations, I find the idea of *edification* from the interpretative approach, that is the idea of taking advantage of the 'unpacking' of others' worldviews in order to put in the foreground one's own background and seen it in a different light, quite relevant and worth developing.

This is an operation which, as both Jackson and O'Grady argue, may be a key factor in developing competences of citizenship and intercultural education. In a similar perspective, O'Grady's idea to sensitize pupils to be more flexible about their own identities through the engagement with plurality and diversity is likewise worth taking into consideration (cf. above, § 4.5.3).

At this point, in order to provide us with a general framework in which to synthesize coherently these various insights and that also offers guidance with more specific educative indications, I shall take direct inspiration from the *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (CoE 2018). In this context, 'democratic culture' is to be understood as a set of values, attitudes and practices shared by groups of individuals affecting and affected by communal decision making, without which democratic institution cannot exists.

More in detail, these values, attitudes and practices can be exemplified as: a commitment to the rule of law and democracy; a commit-

ment to peaceful conflict resolution; a willingness to express ones' own opinion in public venues; a respect to diversity; a commitment to majority decision but in recognition that the majority rule cannot abolish minority rights; a willingness to engage in intercultural dialogue; and a concern for sustainable well-being of human beings. Among these, it should be noted that the two mutually necessary principle in contemporary culturally plural societies are: the principle of democracy, i.e. giving equality, and the principle of intercultural dialogue, i.e. making one's own view understandable to citizens with different cultural affiliations, as well as understanding the views of these culturally different citizens (CoE 2018, 23-5).

In order to foster this kind of democratic culture, a set of 20 competences have been identified, understood in this context as specific psychological resources (specific values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and understanding) that are mobilized and deployed appropriately and effectively, often in clusters, to the demands, challenges and opportunities that are presented by various types of contexts. The selection and the activation, in an adaptive and dynamic manner, of these competences correspond to a broader democratic or intercultural competence, i.e. being able to positively cope with democratic and intercultural situations (32-3).

In what follows I will select and summarize some of those competences. As we will see in the next sections, referring to these competences will guide us in understanding how knowledge, perspectives and methods of the study of religion\s – and in particular of the study of Japanese and other East-Asian religions – may be conductive to educational outcomes proper to intercultural and citizenship education.

Differently from other competence schemes (cf. Portera 2013, 163-83) where values are usually implicitly treated as 'attitudes', the CoE framework, since it considers certain values as being at "the very heart of democratic living" (CoE 2018, 39), puts the adhesion to these values, in their explicit normative and prescriptive quality, as an essential prerequisite. In other words, giving value to certain ideas is treated as a required competence. The first value is human dignity and human rights, i.e. the value of considering every human being of equal worth and entitled to the same set of rights. The second value is cultural diversity, i.e. to consider the plurality of cultural affiliations and perspectives as positive assets for society. It is worth noting here that there is a tension between the universality of human rights and the particularity of cultural diversity. The third value is democracy, fairness and rule of law, i.e. the adhesion to certain principles on how society should operate, such as equal participation in decision making, decision by majority with protection of minority, and fairness through shared rules (38-41). Considering the previous discussion on equality, objectivity and freedom of and from religions, we need also to add, among these values, that of a secular society.

I think it is important, in reference to an overall educative framework for a RE, to explicitly put in the foreground these values. This operation is needed if we want these values to be readily recognized, referenced, and interiorized in any relevant teaching situation (especially in dealing with contemporary sensitive issues). This operation is also important in order to acknowledge how no teaching can be completely value-free, and how these values are historical constructs. The point is to avoid considering these values as metaphysical principles in the same manner of religious postulates.

Apart from values, another category of competences is 'attitudes', in the sense of 'overall mental orientation', consisting of both cognitive, emotional and behavioral aspects. The relevant ones for our discussion are the following: there is 'openness to cultural otherness', towards both different worldviews, values or practices and peoples who partake in them. It is not to be understood as a mere experiencing or consuming what is 'exotic', but entails being receptive towards cultural diversity and being willing to suspend judgment, which in turn implies questioning the notion of 'naturalness' or 'normality' of one's own cultural characterization. A second competence is 'respect', i.e. to judge something or someone to be of somewhat importance, and it is a better formulation than tolerance, which has an ambiguous, patronizing stance. Respect does not mean minimizing or ignoring difference, nor require agreement. Also, it is in tension and correlation with the issue of protecting the above-mentioned values (for example, the dilemma of respecting the freedom of manifesting those beliefs which, on the other hand, undermine the rights of others). The competences of 'civic mindedness' and 'responsibility' are relevant for us in their emphasis on being thoughtful of one's responsibility and duty in relation to an agreed set of values. They refer to a sense of belonging to a community and to the willingness to contribute to the common interest, be it that of local neighborhood or of the entire global society. Last, but not the least relevant attitude for our discussion is 'tolerance of ambiguity' in objects, persons, events or situations. It entails the recognition of the possibility of multiple perspectives, the acceptance of contradictions, the willingness to accept uncertainty and addressing them constructively (41-5).

A third category of competences is 'skills', understood as the capacity to carry out complex patterns of either thinking or acting. For our purposes, it is worth noting the "autonomous learning skill", especially in its aspect as judging the "reliability of a source of information, [and] assessing for possible bias or distortion" (46). "Analytical and critical thinking skills" – which have been often cited already – entail two important clusters of operations. The first consist of breaking down information in constitutive elements, examining and interpreting both themselves and in connection with others, identifying possible discrepancies and envisioning possible alter-

native relationships and synthesis. Critical thinking implies understanding preconceptions and assumptions, engaging with rhetorical purposes and hidden agendas, situating in historical context, and, most notably, recognizing one's own assumptions, preconceptions and the contingency of one's own position as dependent on cultural affiliations. A final skill worth mentioning is 'empathy', less in its emotional tones, than in the idea of being able to step outside one's own frame of reference to try to imagine oneself in the frame of reference of people from other cultural affiliations (46-52).

The last, but quite relevant, category of competences deals with 'knowledge and critical understanding', i.e. an active and reflective comprehension of a body of information. These competences differ from each other basically in their thematic area. The first of them is "knowledge and critical understanding of the self". This means knowledge and critical understanding of one's own cultural affiliations, of all those preconceptions, assumptions, cognitive and emotional biases that affect our perspective, and of the fact that our very perspective is contingent and dependent on our cultural affiliations. The next relevant area is 'culture and cultures', in the sense of the critical understanding that cultural groups are internally variable and contested, that they are evolving and changing in time and space through interaction with other factors such as economy or politics, and that there are power structures and discriminatory practices within and between cultural groups. This competence also entails the comprehension of the influence of cultural affiliation in people's thinking and behaviors. Apart from an understanding of the dynamics of culture, this competence also implies having a certain knowledge of all those specific beliefs, values, norms, practices, discourses and artifact that may be employed by people that we perceive as having this or that cultural affiliations (52-3, 55).

Interestingly enough, 'religion' is treated by the framework as a separate area (55) from culture. This could run the risk of essentialising and imposing an ethnocentric point of view (cf. above, § 2.1.5), thus undermining some of its very principles, namely the recognition of the cultural contingency of assumptions and preconceptions. However, I do not consider this as affecting the usefulness of the whole framework. Therefore, while I would argue for the need to treat religion and culture with the same parameters, this separation may be justified as 'provisional' or 'instrumental', due to the commonly held modern idea of religion as a separate dimension of society. At any rate, along with agreeable proposals as such promoting knowledge and understanding that the religious life of individuals is likely to differ from standard textbook representations, or promoting knowledge of the internal diversity of religious groups, their evolution and change (just like any other cultural phenomenon), there are some proposals in need of revision. These are the suggestions to focus on key texts and doctrines,

and on key features of beliefs and experiences of individuals. Similarly, the framework also seems to implicitly assume that individuals belong exclusively to only one religious tradition at the same time. I will address these issues, which I consider shortcomings, during my discussion on the epistemological dimension in the next section.

Concerning the other relevant area of history, The framework insists on the comprehension of the fact that interpretations of the past vary through time and across cultures, that there are various narratives, each coming from different perspectives, concerning the historical forces that shape the contemporary world. The method of historical investigation is considered a key competence, especially for what concerns the awareness of the process of selection and construction of historical narratives, and of the importance to access alternative, often marginalized, historical sources. This competence includes also the knowledge and understanding of how certain pivotal concepts, such as democracy and citizenship – and, I would argue, also other concepts such as religion or secularity – have evolved in different ways in different cultures over time. Lastly, one should know and understand how histories are often ethnocentric and discriminatory and how they can be a powerful tool that has led in some cases to crimes against humanity.

Mass and digital media represents another relevant area for our discussion, for the simple reason that different information and representations of religions comes through it. The framework promotes in fact knowledge and critical understanding of the process of selection and interpretation of information before transmission for public consumption, which would also entail the understanding of the notion of information as a kind of commodity in the context of a producer-consumer situation. This is functional to the understanding of how media affects judgments and behaviors of individuals, how political messages, propaganda and hate speech – I would add also the more subtle stereotypes and discriminating assumptions – are present in media communications and how individuals can guard themselves against the effect of these communications (55-6).

Other areas considered by the framework are politics, law, human rights, economics, the environment and sustainability. While on the surface these areas seem to have little or no connection with RE, we have already discussed on many occasions the various critiques of the concept of religion as separate dimension of society. The framework too observes that

> cultures are dynamic and change over time as a result of political, economic and historical events and developments. (30)

Therefore, I would include, among relevant competences, the promotion of

knowledge and understanding of the connections between economic, social, political and environmental processes, especially when viewed from a global perspective. (57)

However, I would also add, among these processes, the factor 'culture', including, of course, religious phenomena.

5.3 The Epistemological Dimension

5.3.1 Recapitulation and Further Insights

As we have observed in various points of this work, English RE features quite multifarious epistemological approaches and relative theoretical conceptualizations (implicit or explicit) concerning the issue of 'religion'. This may be explained also by the fact that the institutional reference documents do not explicitly dwell much in detail in this regard. Nonetheless, in ch. 4 we managed to highlight the different epistemologies of English RE in their key aspects, such as the fundamental postulates, concepts and theories, technical terms, typology of objects and methods of research.

We saw that the 2004 *Non-statutory National Framework for Religious Education* endorses implicitly a conception of religion which depicts it as a a highly coherent set of propositions dealing with key questions of meaning and truth, such as the origins of the universe, life after death, good and evil, beliefs about God and values such as justice, honesty and truthfulness. Accordingly, religions should be engaged as a sort of philosophical and moral systems, in the sense of 'resources' and 'guidance' for knowing and engaging the world from the point of view of certain 'ultimate questions'. This is what I termed as 'theological-philosophical-existential' approach (§ 4.2.2).

The 2013 *Review of Religious Education in England* does not move much further. It sticks to a conception and representation of religion which highlights propositional contents, i.e. beliefs and teaching. These are cherished as 'sources of wisdom' to be extracted from official texts, from historical figures or individuated in practices which – allegedly – express them. However, there is a stronger emphasis on diversity within religion. To engage religions also as social facts is in fact recommended, in the sense of exploring how beliefs, practices and forms of expression influence individuals and communities. In other words, there is an opening towards an approach from social sciences (§ 4.2.2).

The problematic aspects of this 'theological-philosophical-existential' approach has been explored more in detail in relation to the works of RE authors Wright, Barnes, Erricker and Hannam.

Wright's approach is grounded on a realistic position, i.e. one affirming that it is possible to "identify forms, structures and identities across many dimensions of reality" (Wright 2008, 7). And this is what is pursued not only by religious traditions, but by all worldviews, including secularist, agnostic or post-modern ones. In fact, in his opinion, any worldview cannot help but take a position over the nature of the transcendent order-of-things. Concerning more in details his theoretical conception of religions, he considers them consistent and homogeneous social facts, with a 'prototypical' nucleus not undermined by peripheral fuzzy contours. Religions provide answers to questions concerning ultimate reality and the way of behaving accordingly, utilizing a range of distinctive cultural symbols and expressing these answers in social practice which distinguish themselves as a specific way-of-being-in-the-world (§ 4.3.2).

Barnes identifies the key peculiarity of religions in being systems of beliefs concerned with unconditioned reality or beings. The distinctive account of such a transcendent reality is then integrated in other beliefs about human origins, personhood and human salvation, and in practices such as rituals and social organizations. The difference in these key beliefs is what justifies distinctions between the various religions. He admits nonetheless the possibility of inner variation and creativity within religions, also at the level of individuals. We have seen that both Wright and Barnes share a fundamental epistemological approach to religions which is grounded on philosophical and theological methods. That is, to study religion is to explore the different answers each religion offers concerning the ontological nature of ultimate reality and to gauge the rational coherence of their truth-claims (§§ 4.3.2 and 4.3.3).

We have critically highlighted how Wright and Barnes' approach is profoundly influenced by a Protestant-Christian paradigm of religion, with strong emphasis on the creedal dimension, doctrinal texts and discreteness between religious traditions, which are understood as coherent and rational systems of thought and practice exclusively focused on lofty metaphysical and ethical issues. Therefore, it is clearly incompatible with the complexity of the theme of Japanese and other Asian religions which, – we have seen in ch. 3 – have many traits that explicitly challenge the Protestant-Christian paradigm of religion (§ 4.3.4).

Differently from the previous authors, for Erricker it would not make much sense to propose a theory of religion, as it would be another grand narrative not different from those expounded by religious traditions themselves. He starts from the perspective of the educational values of RE. Among these values there is the importance for pupils to develop their own 'small narratives'. He thus proposes that the best way to conceive religions (as well as non-religious worldviews such as humanism) is to engage them as 'conceptual world-

views'. This means conceiving them as being made up of a web of specific concepts peculiar to that tradition, which can be nonetheless connected with generic concepts of human existence and with concepts common to many religions (these latter are casually drawn from the study of religion\s). These conceptual worldviews are conceived both as interpretative tools in order to make sense of the world, and at the same time as phenomena that have an impact on this world. In this latter sense, worldviews are subject to interpretation by internal branches, and should be historically and socially contextualized. By studying them, pupils construe also their own worldviews. The issues of how a religion should be actually inquired is not discussed in great detail. We have seen that his RE proposal includes a wide range of epistemological stances, theological, socio-anthropological and experiential-philosophical. The application of these latter, moreover, seems to depend on the object at hand, e.g. Hinduism and Buddhism are engaged especially under a experiential-philosophical lens (§§ 4.4.2 and 4.4.3).

A similar situation can be found within Hannam's proposal. She discusses in fact three different ways to conceptualize religions: as a believing stance to propositional truth-claims; as performance of a set of practices in accord to an authoritative rule; finally, as existential experience. This latter – and quite ambiguous – conceptualization presents religion as a kind of attitude towards a 'divine plane' which is neither totally transcendent nor capturable in a statement of beliefs or set of practices. It is possible to know/engage such a 'divine plane' by experientially (i.e. not necessarily in verbal-rational ways) living through the manifestations of it, which may often correspond to the immanent world itself and to one's own everyday life (§ 4.4.2). We have also seen (§ 4.4.3) how the modality of enquiry into religion is highly subordinated on her educational goal. Therefore, what she basically proposes is an existential engagement with religions, in the sense of exploring those elements in religions which help fostering an attentiveness of one's own existence and actions in the world in relation to the existence of others. A sort of 'mysticization' of the social and political consciousness of the pupil.

Erricker and Hannam's epistemological approach to religions have been criticized due to their excessively subordination to their educational goals (cf. above, § 5.2.1). Errickers's focus on conceptual elements, in order to provide pupils with 'building blocks' to both understand a religious worldview and to construe their own ones, actually results in representations of religions, especially East-Asian ones, as a sort of 'wisdom' or 'rarefied spirituality'. This clearly shows the influence of the long history of orientalist and self-orientalist representations of these traditions (cf. above, § 3.3), as well as the contemporary discourse on the superiority of 'spirituality' *versus* established religions (cf. above, § 3.2.4). This projection of emic concepts

and perspective onto foreign traditions is even more conspicuous in Hannam, who explicitly affirms that the existential mode of religiosity, represented by modern (and often Christian) philosophers such as Simone Weil, is the best way to address religions, especially Buddhism and Hinduism (§ 4.4.4).

We have also explored other facets of English RE which offer ideas and suggestions definitively more compatible, even insightful, for the SoR-based approach of the present work. The 2018 *Report on Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward* represents a clear change from previous approaches and affirms an explicit endorsement for second-order analysis of religion and religions, informed by a wide range of academic disciplines – including, it has to be noted, theology. Here, religions are conceived as belonging to the larger cathegory of 'worldviews'. These latter are, strictly speaking, peculiar to any individual. Worldviews structure how a person understands the nature of the world and their place in it around fundamental questions of meaning and purpose. They have cognitive, emotional, social and behavioral dimensions. Worldviews that are shared and organized by certain groups and sometimes embedded in institutions are defined 'institutional worldviews'. Included in this group are what we normally call 'religions', as well as non-religious worldviews such as organized Humanism. Some traditions of institutional worldviews might be more concerned with doctrine and orthodoxy, while others might prioritize practices or orthopraxis. Individuals, at any rate, draw their ideas creatively from one or many of these worldviews. Both individuals and institutional worldviews adapt themselves to new times and cultures. Distinction between religious and non-religious worldviews is not clear-cut. In order to heuristically define the religious or non-religious nature of a worldview, the document limits itself to following the self-definition of adherents. However, it does not ignore the key issue of the historical weight, both past and present, of the discourses over the nature of religion. In fact, it states that understanding 'religion' as a category is central to the aims of the subject, and therefore also recommends a genealogical study of the concept of religion (§ 4.2.2).

Jackson adopts a fairly constructivist and nominalist take on religions, conceiving them as social and cultural constructs, the meaning of which has changed over time. The concept of 'religion' and 'religions' are also useful analytical categories in relation to sets of beliefs, practices, experiences and values dealing with fundamental existential questions, such as those of birth, identity and death. By using these categories, we can regroup various phenomena by means of family resemblance. However, he does posit a common element, which consists in having "some degree of transcendental reference" (Jackson 2008b, 21). Also, Jackson's concept of religion should be considered in the background of a larger, general conception of

cultures as having fuzzy edges, being internally diverse, negotiated and contested, whose adherents actually draw on a large pool of diversified cultural resources. As indicated by the very name of his approach, for Jackson the study of religion\s is fundamentally an interpretative activity. This entails creating meaningful connections between 'experience-near' and 'experience-far' concepts and interpreting the meaning of a web of mutually related elements, in which a single part illuminates the whole and vice versa. The subjectivity of the interpreters is not discarded, but the risk of appropriation, simplification and projection of biases is mitigated through the reflection on the act itself of interpretation (§ 4.5.2).

O'Grady engages religions through Smart's theories, i.e. conceiving them as having seven, mutually interrelated dimensions: doctrinal, mythological-narrative, ethical, experiential, ritual, institutional and material-artistic. While he distances himself from putting emphasis on personal experience or giving primacy to systems of beliefs, he nonetheless states that the distinctively religious or 'sacred' aspect of religions lies in their focus on transcendental realities and on the revelation of some 'truths' which answer to ethical and existential dilemmas (§ 4.5.2). O'Grady (2019) does not dwell on how religions should be inquired in general terms, but directly proposes that pupils should have a sort of "dialogue with difference"(represented both by material studied and peers) that makes them aware of their own backgrounds or assumption, and therefore foster a Gadamerian expansion of horizons (§ 4.5.3).

While we have acknowledged the epistemological potential of the 'interpretative-dialogical' approach exemplified by the three-layered matrix of representations, the idea of *constructive criticism* and the overall grounding in a social sciences' perspective, we also detected some problematic issue, namely the doubtful combination of this epistemological position with a strong emphasis on the personal development and involvement of the pupils through the encounter with religious diversity. However, since the issue of the personal development of pupils is linked with a discourse of motivation and active engagement of pupils in learning RE, I will return on these matters in the context of the learning dimension (cf. *infra*, § 5.5).

In the final analysis, these ambiguities inherent in English RE, which is supposed to also offer a detached, objective approach to religious traditions, can be ultimately related to the fundamental ambiguity, if not outright paradox, of pursuing the aim of 'learning about religion' together with the ambivalent aim of 'learning from religion' as proposed by institutional documents such as the 2004 or 2013 frameworks. Indeed, theories and representations employed to teach about religion vary (cf. Alberts 2007, 99-100) in accord to the possible interpretations of the aim of 'learning from religions', which range, as we have seen, from being trained to engage with rational

debate about the order-of-things to being able to create one's own spiritual worldview. This resonates with the observations of several scholars about English RE who ultimately consider it, together with other examples of integrative RE in Europe, as featuring aspects labeled "small-c(onfessional)" (Jensen, Kjeldsen 2013; Jensen 2017a) or "small i(ndoctrination)" (Alberts 2019). The latter means an

> unquestioned discursive hegemony of a particular (Christian) notion of religion as a frame of reference for almost all education about religion, which is, furthermore, often represented as if it constituted not a particular religious view of religion, but a kind of universal perspective on religion. (54)

Indeed, this is what we have encountered in the RE approaches above critiqued, even if, in this case, I would stress more the *modern* component above the *Christian* one.

Consequently, to avoid this implicit small indoctrination, Alberts proposes to decrease the ambiguity in the formulation 'learning from religion' by changing it into "*learning from **the study of religion\s**" (Alberts 2008, 320; italics and bold in original). I agree and interpret her suggestion as pointing to the functional connection between the educational/axiological dimension and the epistemological one. Therefore, having already discussed the former, I proceed to discuss the RE epistemological proposals of various SoR-base scholars before advancing my own proposal in the next section.

The choice of the academic study of religion\s as the epistemological base of our RE proposal gives us certain firm coordinates, at least on the methodological dimension.

We have seen in fact (§ 2.1.6) a cluster of interrelated, common meta-methods. The first is *classification*, which aims to give a heuristic order among various phenomena, but it must be constantly retooled on the basis of a new theoretical framework and, importantly, on the grounds of comparison with new data. *Comparison*, indeed, is crucial as it is a common *modus operandi* of the human mind but also as a precise method in the study of religion\s. Apart from helping in building new classifications, it is also a key operation to illuminate previous hidden sides of a phenomenon by juxtaposing it with another different and/or better-known phenomenon. To avoid simplistic generalization or reduction (a charge to past phenomenological comparativism), comparison must be accompanied by a thorough *contextualization* (historical, social, cultural, even environmental) and a careful and reasoned selection of the *tertium comparationis*. All these operations ultimately aim at reaching *interpretation*, *explanation*, and *description* of a certain phenomenon. *Interpretation* means to grasp the various elements in a meaningful way, while *explanation* should entail the disclosure of how things are causally connected. However,

strict, natural law-like causal connections are extremely difficult to find in social sciences. Therefore, *explanation* and *interpretation* are often seen as two sides of the same coin, in the sense that a phenomenon is explained when inserted in what (according to a certain theory or implicit common sense) is considered a meaningful account which includes other elements (interpreted as) relevant. All this then feeds in what is a *description* of a certain religious phenomenon. Here it is pivotal to distinguish between the different interpretive frameworks of the insider and of the outsider, and to take into account possible tensions with the insider, especially in the case of comparison with other traditions or when 'hermeneutics of suspicion' are applied.

However, things are not so simple. Concerning the issue of epistemological paradigm for a SoR-based RE, Meylan (2015) draws from Develay (1992) the idea of *matrice disciplinaire*, that is the existence, within a certain discipline, of contrasting approaches which favor certain theories, concepts, and ultimately certain values over others. A situation that may well led to different teaching objects (cf. also above, § 2.2.6). He identifies three possible disciplinary matrixes within the study of religion\s. The first is the *matrice disciplinaire phénoménologique*, which sets up a list of operative concepts (divinities, myth, rites, symbol, space, time, life/death, etc.) around the *sui generis* concept of 'sacred'. The shortcomings of this approach have been widely analyzed, as we have seen in ch. 1, by the deconstructionist approach, that represents the second disciplinary matrix, the *déconstructionniste* one. This latter puts "the implicit relation bewteen the historian of religions and Christianity" at the center of its approach (Meylan 2015, 89), which must be unfolded through the analysis of certain key aspects, arranged in three main categories: politics (e.g. colonialism, imperialism), ideology (religion, secularity, science), and epistemology (history of the disciplines, its concepts and categories). However, for Meylan this matrix remains somehow paradoxically Christian-centric, as it basically looks for Christianity lurking in every piece of scholarship about religion and, in its extreme version, is basically conductive to merely asserting the incapacity of translating other cultures in our native cultural idiom. As a solution he proposes the *matrice disciplinaire nominaliste*, according to which the concept of religion as well as other related concepts are heuristic categories aimed not at understanding what religion is, in the sense of its ontological essence, but at providing "an entry point (next to the ones of economy, of language, etc.)" (90), in order to make sense of certain human behaviors and interactions. More in detail, he explicitly cites the definition of religion by Lincoln (2003, 5-7) as an example of a disciplinary matrix articulated around the Foucauldian idea of discourse, which, in this case at hand, connects institutions, practices, communities around concerns that "transcend

the human, temporal, and contingent" (5).[1] For Meylan, this is the only matrix that can both exclude the apologetic dimension and give a factual knowledge of what are usually labeled 'religious traditions'.

Indeed, also for Jensen (2019, 45), the notion of 'religion' is an analytical tool made by scholars. Similarly, 'religions' are representations, analysis and explanations made by scholars. In a nutshell, he recommends always remembering that "map is not territory". Nonetheless, he also claims that

> there is something out there [...] that despite whatever theoretical and methodological issues and complexities implied, can be identified, classified and studied as religion\s. (Jensen 2020, 195)

To identify it, he offers a very simple (operational) definition of religion as

> a cultural (sub-)system that differs from others by way of a reference to a postulated more than human and more than natural something. (201)

According to Jensen, RE should be a study-of-religion\s program in a mini-format. And for him a qualified (i.e. scientific) study of religion\s should involve both 'deconstructivist' or 'discourse theory' analyses as well as cognitivist, biological, and evolutionist approaches, in an interdisciplinary approach that combines cognitive sciences, biology, neurology, sociology, philology, and history (Jensen 2019, 39).

More in practice, RE should engage 'religion' and 'religions', past and present, majority and minority, collective and individual, in an analytical, critical, pluralistic and comparative way. This means that all religions are treated equally, analyzed with attention to their contexts through a framework (formed by conceptual tools such as rituals, myth, etc.) that does not refer to one or some particular religions but is the result of pluralistic, cross-cultural and comparative studies of the highest possible number of traditions. Religions and the notion of 'religion' are not to be taken at face value but interpreted and explained in historical and cultural contexts. The overarch-

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1   Since another scholar, Jensen (personal communication; cf. also 2020, 202), endorses this definition for the construction of a RE, it is worth citing it in its entirely: "[Religion is] 1. *A discourse whose concerns transcend the human, temporal, and contingent, and that claims for itself a similarly transcendent status.* [...] 2. *A set of practices whose goal is to produce a proper world and/or proper human subjects, as defined by a religious discourse to which these practices are connected.* [...] 3. *A community whose members construct their identity with reference to a religious discourse and its attendant practices.* [...] 4. *An institution that regulates religious discourse, practices, and community, reproducing them over time and modifying them as necessary, while asserting their eternal validity and transcendent value*" (Lincoln 2003, 5-7; italics in original).

ing questions, far from being existential questions such as "where do we come from?" or "where do we go after death?", should instead be

> about the origin, coming into being, function and use of religious ideas, practices and institutions. Why do humans and human societies have religion? (Jensen 2020, 197)

Also Frank (2016) proposes a well-defined epistemological matrix. She approaches religions as a communicative construct that can be seen as part of a more or less coherent, systemized set of symbols. Part of this symbolic inventory includes communications that refer to transcendence. Actors in the communication of these symbols appropriate and (re)produce them, and the most educated or specialized actors systematize and institutionalize the symbols again and again. Furthermore, as these specialists are also representatives of communities, they socialize individuals – in the sense of introducing these individuals into the objective world regulated by these symbols – giving them the opportunity to participate. For these socialized individuals, the symbolic content has a collectively binding validity, and has to be passed on from generation to generation. In order to define a certain element of communication (a story, a ritual, etc.) as religious, Frank defines two criteria: a collective basis of validity and the reference to a transcendent dimension. It is not a clear-cut division, and grey areas are expected. Furthermore, one must take into account the full spectrum of religion-related communications, including those in negative or restrictive terms, e.g. atheistic, or humanistic positions.

Alberts (2007, 31-41, 373-6) proposes a theorical background in which the concept of religion should be to delineate with a "dynamic polycentrism of aspects" (373), thus avoiding the question of the 'essence' of religion. The first two are functional aspects (cf. above, § 2.1.2): religions provide 'orientation', in the sense of enabling human beings to find their ways in life and world by referring them to a framework that provides meaning and a way to better cope with the sense of human contingency, as other cultural systems (e.g. science or economy) may not be as effective in doing. The second aspect refers to the provision of normative frameworks on the grounds of certain interpretations of general/universal nature, for example, the idea, in Buddhism, that suffering is at the base of existence. The third aspect is descriptive, and refers to the multi-faced dimension of religion, such as the doctrinal, mythological, ethical, ritual, experiential, social and material-artistic ones. Finally, the issue of substantial aspect, i.e. the identification as a certain kind of transcendence as a minimal criterion to be defined as religion, is taken into account. However, it is dismissed, in order to have a concept of religion that can be broad enough to include not only phenomena outside the so

called 'world religions', but also phenomena in which the distinction religious/non-religious is blurred: secular worldviews like scientism, humanism, certain ideas on market economy, implicit or civic religion, and so on. On a more practical level, Alberts proposes a multiperspective approach, so these various aspects may be addressed, and to adopt the following methodological key points: not conceiving religion as *sui generis* phenomenon and essentially incommensurable with other socio-cultural phenomena; not universalizing features of individual religions; not only overemphasizing certain aspects of religions. Finally, the definitions and operational concepts are to be open to modification upon confrontation with materials coming from multiple and diverse religious phenomena.

5.3.2   Discussion and Proposal

We have seen (§ 2.2.3) that, in the transposition from *savoir savant* to *savoir scolaire*, a key passage is the individuation of pivotal and indispensable elements such as postulates, fundamental theories and key distinguishing concepts, technical terms, research methodology, as well as the historical development of the discipline. However, both Develay (1992; cf. also above, § 2.2.6) and Meylan (2015; cf. also above, § 5.3.1) warn us that various disciplinary matrixes can be possible. Let us try, then, to identify certain common traits. In case we find ourselves in a situation in which we have to choose among different options, we will identify those principles or arguments in order to ground and justify the said choice.

A preliminary, probably redundant, but nonetheless necessary observation is that the very defining epistemological trait of the study of religion\s lies in approaching its object as a completely human phenomenon, without resorting to any supernatural explanation nor adopting the perspective of any religious traditions. The necessity of reiterating this seemingly obvious statement is justified by the consideration that this discipline has inescapable Christian roots, often concealed behind apparent neutral approaches, and in the concept of religion itself (cf. above, §§ 2.1.3, 2.1.5 and 2.1.8).

Accordingly, as a first step, we may say that from all the various discussions engaged in ch. 1, and from the individual proposals by various SoR scholars dealing with RE, there is a wide consensus for a baseline nominalist approach for what concerns the definitions and conceptual formulations of 'religion' and 'religions'. In other words, our RE has its first foundations in an elucidative, interpretative strategy that consciously uses the history-laden terms 'religion' and 'religions' as stipulative tools to make sense of various phenomena among which we identify family resemblances (§§ 2.1.2, 2.1.4 and 2.1.7). This choice of a heuristic and elucidative approach, instead of an ontolog-

ical approach that seeks equivalence between object and definitions, is also preferable for other reasons. On the axiological/educational level, the heuristic and elucidative stance implies an awareness of the empirical complexities of cultural realities and of the necessity to tolerate degrees of ambiguity, that is the possibility of diverse perspective and the acceptance of provisional determination. Ultimately, this epistemological choice is a way to address complexity in a constructive way and to strive for further improvements. Also, it is an approach that has its ground in the acknowledgment of the genealogies and the uses of the concept of 'religion' (§ 2.1.5).

Notwithstanding the scholarly consensus concerning the avoidance of identifying a certain univocal essence, we have seen also the necessity for certain criteria to be set in order to distinguish our object of interest from other phenomena, that is a substantialist criterion. Many examples of this latter can be listed, from a general reference to a certain transcendent dimension, to more defined postulation of counter-intuitive superhuman beings (§§ 2.1.4 and 2.1.7). Alberts (2007; cf. also above, § 5.3.1), on this regard, explicitly reject the reference to transcendence in order to include grey areas such as civil religion. I would not go as far as she does, and I think instead that a good compromise between creating certain epistemological boundaries and addressing at the same time family resemblances in grey areas can be found in Schilibrack's proposal (2013). We have seen that he takes, as substantialist criterion, the reference to 'super-empirical realities', i.e. non-empirical realities treated as existing independently from empirical sources (cf. also above, § 2.1.2). For example, if people treat some non-empirical realities, such as justice or the idea of nation, as a given entities independent of human creation, then we may speak of religion – in this case at hand, more specifically of a form of civil religion. In summary, we can posit a starting, minimal definition of religion, somehow akin to Jensen's operational definition (2020, 201; cf. above, § 5.3.1), to which we also add Smith's indication that a "map is not a territory", i.e. the awareness of the very concept of religion as an analytical tool of the scholar. This definition runs like this: *the scholarly and heuristic use of the term 'religion' refers to a cultural (sub-)system that differs from others by way of a reference to super-empirical realities.*

With this first step we establish two key elements of the epistemology of the study of religion\s: its heuristic, elucidative aim and a very simple delineation of its research object. However, when we delve more deeply into the epistemological structure and tackle the issue of theoretical conceptualization of religion\s, we find (as we have already seen) that more and more differences emerge between all the various theories and more complex definitions (§§ 2.1.4 and 2.1.7). Also, we must take into consideration the two fundamental approaches, the 'constructive' and 'deconstructive', within the study of religion\s

(§ 2.1.1). I take here as guiding criterion the didactic principle of *essentialization* (§ 2.2.3), i.e. to address all the possible epistemological articulations in the most efficient way, that is the different ways to inquiry into a certain object. Secondly, I refer to the *historicization* principle, i.e. to address the dialectics between old theories and new perspectives within the inevitable historical development of the discipline. Accordingly, and following the proposal of Alberts (2017a; cf. also above, § 2.1.1) both the 'constructionist' and 'deconstructionist' sides should be taken into consideration.

On this background, I propose a more detailed definition of religion, which should be taken primarily as a reference for teachers, in the sense of a kind of mnemonic device to see various key points in one single gaze. I do not suggest that this definition should be engaged directly by pupils – especially younger ones – without any adaptation. Instead, it should be a guidance for the planning of teaching and learning activities. This definition implicitly contains a certain theoretical approach to religion, which will be explained next. It runs like this:

> The term 'religion' refers to a seemingly unproblematic and universal phenomenon. However, it has a distinct genealogy, its meanings and uses have changed through history and places. The reason why it seems unproblematic and universal is related to the modern pretension of universality by Euro-American cultures.
>
> With this in mind, the scholarly and heuristic use of the terms 'religion', 'religious' and 'religions' stipulatively refers to phenomena in which communities and individuals create, use, change, select and transmit various type of cultural resources which, interacting with human biological make-up and referring to super-empirical realities, support cognitively, emotionally and bodily these communities and individuals in 'making homes', in 'crossing' and in 'creating boundaries'.

The first phrase is basically the explanation of the need to have a heuristic and elucidative approach which does not postulate any 'essences'. It is also a reference to the critical/deconstructive strand in the study of religion\s. Another reference to this strand is implicit in the words 'creating boundaries', in the sense that religions are also

> a potent manner by which humans construct maps [...] through which they defend and contest issues of social power and privilege. (McCutcheon 2000, 173)

This observation is not limited to phenomena in which social groups are distinguished or separated on the base, e.g. of religious affiliation, but includes also the ways in which the very concept of religion

has been used as universal yardstick to classify people and cultures (cf. above, §§ 2.1.5 and 2.1.8).

'Religion' is a noun used collectively to refer to phenomena in general sense, and to the conceptual tool created by scholars. 'Religious' is an adjective used to indicate that certain phenomena present aspects indicated by the concept of 'religion'. 'Religions' is a noun used to indicate those phenomena that have a common conceptual point of reference in 'religion' but present historical or structural continuities or discontinuities in such a way that, from a heuristic perspective, makes sense to separate (hence speaking of two or more religions) or unite (hence speaking of one religion). 'Religions' is a useful term in the dyad 'religion/religions' to indicate empirical phenomena defined as religious and to distinguish them from the theoretical concept. However, I think it would be easier to distinguish between different 'religions' if they were approached in their being 'traditions', that is, in being complex processes of power, agency, authority, rhetoric, ideology, community, temporality, memory, continuity, innovation and identity, in which resources are selectively and creatively handed down to the following generation, without implying a dichotomy and contrast with 'modernity'. For the sake of brevity, however, 'religions' can still be used while being carefully mindful of this characterization.

This insistence of this scrupulous, almost tentative use or establishment of terms should not be considered as a mere reproduction of seemingly rhetorical practices often employed in academic writing, but as abiding to the principle of *historicization* in the sense of avoiding presenting an impersonal, a-temporal and intimidating 'monumental' knowledge to pupils. Instead, these 'doubts' and 'qualms' are proof that the discipline is lively, constantly rethinking itself, and not an inert body of knowledge whose rationale may have perished in time (§§ 2.2.2 and 2.2.3). If the pupils are introduced in the dynamic and multifarious nature of the discipline, they will be able to find their suitable observation point. This is a way of reminding of the past errors within the discipline, whose historical retracing is an activity analogous to that of the scholar itself (§ 2.2.3). We have seen that Meylan (2015; cf. also above, § 5.3.1) dismisses the deconstructive disciplinary matrix because ultimately it is still Christian-centered. However, if this may be a reasonable critique in a research context, in an educative context this centeredness on Christianity – better, on Euro-American modernity – is instead functional to the development of the intercultural competence of knowledge and critical understanding of the self (cf. § 5.2.2). That is, the awareness of how our perspective is contingent and dependent on our cultural affiliations and historical backgrounds. It also helps to identify and correct certain uncritical views that affect even our main reference for the educational/axiological framework, that is the above cited competence

of knowledge and critical understanding of religion from the 2018 CoE framework, which treats religion as a separate area from culture to be addressed in terms of texts, doctrines and beliefs (§ 5.2.2).

Since one of the fixed components of our discussion on epistemology is the topic of Japanese and other East-Asian religions, in what follows I want to highlight that the combination of this very topic with the genealogical critique of Euro-American modernity, which is typical of the deconstructive approach, is functional and conductive to the intercultural educational aims we have set above (§ 5.2.2).

As we have seen in § 3.2, by looking at several examples of Japanese and other East-Asian religions, a host of elements that may be unquestioningly treated as central to the conceptualization of religion – a case in which even the 2018 CoE framework shows little self-criticism – are instead unveiled as being not so pivotal or even misleading. In my view, this may fruitfully lead to the development of 'openness to cultural otherness', in the sense of questioning the notion of 'naturalness' or 'normality' of one's own cultural characterization, in this case, of religion. For example, to be aware that the notion of exclusive religious belonging is misleading may help enhancing the consciousness of the complexity of cultural phenomena, i.e. that multiple affiliations are possible. Moreover, this awareness should lead to more tolerance towards the ambiguity of a person whose religious behavior may sometimes be explained in Buddhist terms, for example, and sometimes not. To acknowledge the possibility of different frames of reference, in this case concerning what may count as 'religion', may be conductive to be 'respectful' without ignoring differences nor being necessarily in agreement, and explaining disagreement on the base of the difference between frames of reference. The fact that what we may expect from a certain encounter with other religious traditions may prove inexistent or scarcely meaningful (such as the holding of a precise set of beliefs), can be conductive, in my opinion, to two processes of intercultural value. First, the identification of those aspects that we unquestioningly posit as having universal relevance; second, a self-critical analysis of the reasons why we posit in the first place such elements as universally meaningful.

This last process is connected basically to what we have explored in § 3.3, i.e. the impact of the modern concept of religion in the development of East-Asian religions and the dialectics of hetero- and self-representations entangled around this concept. Explaining the cultural-historical reasons for the apparent naturality of certain widespread, but partial, representations (e.g. the focus on inner and 'loftier' aspects such as meditation or philosophical analysis, with the implicit or explicit dismissal of other aspects as 'degeneration') can be considered part of an educative agenda aimed at the "decolonization of knowledge" (Nye 2019, 8). Of course, this does not mean that any phenomenon that actually correspond to said partial repre-

sentations should be labeled 'inauthentic' or dismissed because of being 'products of colonialism'. As observed also in § 3.3, in a very important sense the focus on Euro-American modernity is actually functional for a better understanding of the modern development of East-Asian religions and the modern self- and hetero-representations of them. In this way the critical understanding of the self is intertwined with the critical understanding of cultures and histories, especially when power structures, discriminatory practices and political agenda are to be highlighted. To look at how Japanese and other East-Asian traditions had to cope with the concept of religion shows that ideas such as 'religion' or 'secularity' have evolved in different ways in different cultures over time, thus also implying the necessity of considering other historical narratives. At the same time, these neglected historical narratives may as well highlight other aspects of ourselves. In fact, as Miyake observes,

> Orientalism, as a process of contrastive and explicit othering, has contributed in modern age to shape, by binary opposition, Euro-American identity, enabling the very idea of 'West' *to remain in many cases implicit or unmarked as the universal norm*. (Miyake 2015, 97; italics added)

An example of an unmarked universal norm, which we have instead criticized, is the ambiguous use of the concept of spirituality. This is especially relevant in connection with East-Asian religions, as we have seen above in § 3.2.4 and in our critiques to the experiential-instrumental approach (§ 4.4.4). There is also a consonance between the above discussed educative aim of fostering critical thinking (§ 5.2.2) and the observations we have just made. The reason is that all these observations imply the activation of skills such as: understanding preconception and assumptions; engaging with rhetorical purposes and hidden agendas; situating in historical contexts; gauging the reliability of a source of information; and assessing for possible bias or distortion.

However, limiting ourselves to introducing pupils to the roots of misunderstanding is not enough. The above-mentioned competence of tolerance towards ambiguity implies also dealing constructively with complexity, while the competence of 'civic mindedness and responsibility' (§ 5.2.2) entails also making decisions and being accountable for them. To put it bluntly, if we expect future citizens to be able to discuss what should count as religion or not in legal documents, for example, equipping them only with critical perspectives will not help. What is needed is also a way to foster the competence of empathy, i.e. the capacity to grasp the frames of reference of others and put them in comparison with our frames of reference, making responsible decisions about what may be negotiable or not. This

latter operation is linked also with our considerations about the necessity of foregrounding the value frames of reference (§ 5.2.2).

On the background of these observations, I have taken inspiration, for the 'constructive' part of our approach to religion, from Tweed's theoretical ideas (2006; cf. also above, § 2.1.7). The reason is that it is a bottom-up approach aimed at offering a flexible way of 'travelling' among these phenomena called 'religions', in an illuminative way, instead of explaining them on well-defined grounds, such as in the case of cognitive sciences-based theories. Indeed, the aim is not to put pupils in the condition of actually making new discoveries or breakthroughs in the discipline, but to somehow fictionally recreate the largest possible variety of situations experienced by researchers. In order to do this, I found Tweed's work useful especially in his elegant metaphors of "crossing and dwelling", even if these have been criticized for being too broad, which for us is instead an advantage. Tweed nonetheless includes mentions of more recent, more hard science-based approaches, such as those based on cognitive science or evolutionist perspective, because they are a major innovation in the study of religion\s and therefore it is worth taking them into consideration. In summary, it responds aptly to the principle of *essentialization*. Apart from the addition of 'making boundaries' and of reference to 'super-empirical realities', already explained above, I have made some other changes to Tweed's definition. More in particular, his phrase "confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering" (Tweed 2006, 54) aptly condenses many insights. However, it does so in a way that is, in my view, excessively abstract. Therefore, I prefer to replace it with a more detailed wording, which runs like this:

> phenomena in which communities and individuals create, use, change, select and transmit various type of cultural resources which, interacting with human biological make-up [...] support cognitively, emotionally and bodily.

The rationale behind this sentence is to highlight the importance of selecting certain aspects that may be used as analytical elements – which are nothing but tools to be constantly re-evaluated. The intention is also to make a functional connection with the educational aim of fostering analytical skills, that is breaking down information in its constitutive elements to be examined and interpreted both in themselves and in connection with others, identifying possible discrepancies and envisioning possible alternative relationships and synthesis. The wording 'cultural resources' is inspired by Campany's (2003) definition of religions as "repertoires of resources" and works well with the idea from Chau (2011) of considering practitioners as being able to draw and creatively use elements from multiple

religious traditions (cf. above, § 3.2.1.3). I have added a stress on the bodily dimension in order to curb possible excessive focus on the inner (cognitive or emotional) dimension, and to avoid overlooking all those instances of religious treatment of the body, both as physical component and as a concept or metaphor (§ 3.2.3). Tweed's metaphors of 'making home' and 'crossing boundaries' are simple yet flexible enough to accommodate also those phenomena which, as we have seen, may represent a challenge to Euro-centric epistemologies. For example, the focus on worldly benefits by e.g. contemporary Japanese religiosity could be labelled under 'making home'. On the other side, we may as well interpret all those examples of tantric religiosity, both in terms of symbols and physical practices, as 'crossing boundaries'. We have seen, in fact, how these latter entail a commitment to reaching superior/secret knowledge or powers, and how, in order to gain such powers, unnatural and even dangerous – such as consumption of sexual fluids – 'crossings' of the social or physiological norms of body had taken place (§ 3.2.3.2).

5.4 The Teaching Dimension

5.4.1 Recapitulation and Further Insights

As observed above in § 2.2.4, with this section we enter in a very practical dimension, which basically refers to the actual activity, on the side of the teachers, of planning and implementing their work in class. According to the soft notion of model explained at the start of this chapter, I will refrain to sort out any precise method of teaching Japanese and other East-Asian religions, but I will focus on certain topics whose discussion may provide useful guidelines. This is also a way to acknowledge the fact that each single phenomenon of teacher planning activities, and performing them in class, is highly specific to that teacher and his/her context (Clerc, Minder, Roduit 2006, 2; cf. also above, § 2.2.1).

For the discussion of the first topic, let us recall Chevallard's notions of 'chronogenesis' and'topogenesis'. The former indicates the evolution of the knowledge planned by the teacher, while the latter indicates the ways in which the teacher, in the actual performance, exploits her/his mastery of the various aspects of the subject matter in order to ensure that it is learned by the pupils, an action that does not have to strictly follow the chronogenesis. I take inspiration from these notions and translate them in our context as *narratives* and *representations*. The first concept refers to the issue of which sequence of information should we engage the pupils with. To give a simple example, should we start teaching about Shintō according to its chronological evolution, or may there be alternative or comple-

mentary ways? The second concept refers to the issue of which aspects should we take into account when engaging a certain object with the pupils, according to the situation at hand. Resorting again to the example of Shintō, when and how should its narrative start? From archeological evidence prior to the arrival of Buddhism? From the establishment of the Jingikan? From the ideas of Yoshida Kanetomo? Or even from the Meiji restauration (§ 3.2.2.3)? While the first or second choice may sound more customary, the other more controversial options can be fruitful adopted if the teacher aims at focusing on the issues of discontinuity and evolution within religious traditions, and wants to show how to establish certain parameters or not when dealing with a religious tradition (e.g. must a religious tradition be self-consciously aware of itself as a discrete social group?) deeply affects the way it can be studied and represented.

Narratives and representations should also take into account the didactic principle of *problematization*, i.e. the individuation of those knots or foundational nuclei, the engagement with which stimulates the application of the mindset proper of the discipline. This is then connected with the didactic principle of *balance*. This means thinking about narratives and representations that provide chances to uniformly address the various epistemological aspects of a certain discipline, i.e. the conceptual-theorical ones, the terminological ones, the contents-related, and the methodological ones. In a few words, to discuss the topic of *narratives* and *representations* means dealing with the question "which contents should the teacher privilege and in which form?".

The second topic concerns the didactic principle of *controllability*, which basically consists of the issue of individuating and formulating both general and specific learning objectives. These latter, together with our educational axioms and aims, are important points of reference for effective planning and implementation. In a few words: which are the short and medium objectives which should guide our planning and assessment of teaching actions?

The third topic is the most fuzzy and difficult to incapsulate in few words, because it pertains to what is called 'didactic engineering', i.e. all the various techniques and tools teachers can apply in their actual performance. Under this topic I also include any other ideas concerning the planification, organization and implementation of an actual activity or set of activities. In a few words: what should teachers do practically in class? This is a complex topic to deal with in this context, given the theoretical approach and the soft notion of model adopted in this study. Are there any teaching methods or didactic mediators better suited to teach and learn Japanese and East-Asian religions? Theoretically, nothing prevents any methods to be effective. Nonetheless, I will provide some reasonable observations from a pragmatical point of view.

It should be observed that we have divided these three topics only for analytic purposes, but they are actually closely related. For example, if a certain narrative starts from a theoretical introduction to the concept of religion and other related analytical terms, this automatically translates into the objective of the acquisition of the relevant terminology and conceptual apparatus of the discipline. This, conversely, may well influence the way the teaching actually takes place, for example, by having pupil focusing on applying terms and concepts such as 'rites' or 'sacred places' to certain case studies, instead of, for example, memorizing a narrative of the doctrinal evolutions of a religion.

Having restricted our scope of interest to these three topics, we proceed now to recapitulate what the RE scholars discussed in this study have proposed in this regard. In this section we will focus mainly on contributions which have a constructive relevance and that are consistent with what we have established as our axiological and epistemological dimension. This means we will refrain from considering practices whose foundations we have already criticized and dismissed as not relevant or even detrimental. These are, for example, the representations of religions by the 'theological-rational' approach and by the 'instrumental-existential' approach. Similarly, we will not deal with the 2004 or 2013 frameworks, given their fundamental ambiguity in their 'learning from religion' proposal.

Starting our recapitulation from the CoRe 2018 report on RE, we have seen (§ 4.2.2) how it represents an innovation in the conceptualization of religions and also, consequently, the way in which they should be represented. In fact, this report stresses the need to show how religions and worldviews are not only diverse and internally complex, but are also dynamic, in the sense that they develop in interaction with each other, through overlapping, cross-fertilization and adaptation to new times and socio-cultural contexts. It warns us not to merely focus on beliefs and practices, but also on narratives, interactions, social norms, artistic expressions and other forms of cultural expression.

Furthermore, this deeper understanding of the complex, diverse and plural nature of the individual traditions should go beyond the limitation of the six 'major world faiths'. Attention should be given to the structural differences among, but also within, worldviews, in the sense that, depending on contexts (even within the same tradition) practitioners may give more weight to doctrine and orthodoxy, while others in other contexts might prioritize practices or orthopraxis.

Turning to Jackson's work, we have seen (§ 4.5.2) his proposal of a matrix on three 'levels': of the individual, of the membership group(s) and of the tradition at large. The dialectical interplay, including power-related dynamics, between these three levels is meant to elucidate the internal diversity, complexity and fuzziness of both inter-

nal and external borders of a given tradition. We also have seen that his approach tends to adopt a fairly equilibrated representation of the various aspects of religious traditions, without excessive focus on the 'usual suspects' such as doctrines and texts. What is peculiar to Jackson is his pupil-centered approach, which translates into a focus on the topics of potential interest and motivation for children, such as festivals and food. This focus is reflected also in the strategy of representing voices of actual insider children, of including aspects of their religious life in the narratives. Such care in providing living portraits of insiders sometimes involves the choice of using categories or divisions germane to that religious traditions, with themes such as 'joining', 'prayer and praise', 'the Bible', 'living as a Christian', and 'sharing and caring for others'.

As for O'Grady, he limits himself to adopting Smart's idea of the seven dimensions of religion already cited above. Additionally, he suggests showing how modalities and degrees of interaction between dimensions vary among religions, and engaging with media portrayals of religion, making pupils reflect on how these could affect their views.

Concerning what should guide the actual teacher practice, Jackson's proposal of activities focuses mainly on the interpretative competence of pupils, in the sense of having them able to move between the parts and the whole of the phenomena/'text' studied. That is, to relate the material drawn from one of the three 'levels' – individual, membership group, tradition – with the material drawn from another level, so that each piece of information shades light on the other ones. While doing so, pupils should be guided in 'building bridges', i.e. trying to approach experience-far concepts by using experience-near ones.

O'Grady proposes a highly child-centered methodology, with the teacher acting as mediator and the children as co-planners of their own learning. However, since this is highly connected with the issue of motivation, as O'Grady himself tells us (2019, 26-8), I will address his ideas in the learning dimension in § 5.5.

Shifting from English RE to SoR-based scholars, Frank's proposal on narratives, representations and objectives is closely tied with her epistemological take on religion, already explained above (§ 5.3.1). When religions are engaged, the following aspects should be taken into account: the personal aspect, i.e. the features of individual religiosity; the social aspect, i.e. the dynamics of the various religious groups and communities; the cultural aspect, i.e. the features of the religious systems of symbols; the exchange processes between these three aspects; finally, the way in which all these aspects of religion work in relation to other spheres of society such as politics, media, art, medicine, etc. For Frank, the focus should be on what people do with religions. This means, for example, that religious systems of symbols (e.g. texts, doctrines) are only learned insofar as they have something to do with the above-mentioned aspects and the ex-

change processes (Franck 2013, 92-7). Another key point for Frank is the distinction between self-portrayals of religious communities and religious individuals, and representations of religions by outsiders such as the media, politicians, individuals, artists, tourists, etc. (Franck 2016, 26).

Concerning the planning of concrete lessons, therefore, it is necessary to generate contents based on situations that all children, adolescents and adults encounter and have to deal with in their environment and in the everyday world. This means avoiding any preference for content that may be relevant only to certain pupils, especially those belonging to certain religions. Similarly, contents should not be chosen on the base of their relevance to the life-worlds of the pupils (cf. also above, § 1.1). The knowledge of the religious systems of symbols is important only insofar as they deal with religious communities, individuals, and public religious images that are addressed in the classroom. The religions of groups and individuals should be tackled in a comparative way through cross-cutting themes. Concerning the choice of the religious traditions to be engaged, a selection is inevitable, which can and should be varied according to the context of the school. Attention should be paid to the relevance of the item for the respective age groups. Similarly, the need for variations or adaptations to the actual contexts should be taken in consideration. In any case, Frank suggests that the interest in the subject is expected to increase if those aspects and dimensions of 'religion' that children and adolescents encounter in their everyday lives are addressed. Accordingly, it is less likely that such aspects and dimension are represented by the Bible, the Qur'an, Hindu idols, a bar mitzvah or, any more general, beliefs and doctrines. More often pupils encounter 'religion' on the street, in newspapers, on the Internet, in literature, in films and in advertising (Franck 2016, 19-25).

Frank operationalizes her ideas for RE in a model of competences (25-30). A first set is called 'contextualization competences' and refer to the ability to describe sources or data, to contextualize them in time, space and socio-cultural contexts, and, especially, to discern whether they pertain to self-representations or to external representations.

The second set is 'research competences' which basically involves the capacity to come up with questions suitable to certain objects (persons, ideas, material objects) and, conversely, to search for objects suitable to the posed questions. The rationale behind this precise set of competences is that the study of religion\s is not a matter of reproducing religious or theological teachings, but is rather a matter of describing the empirically ascertainable plural reception of these teachings by individuals and communities, and the representations of religions in the media, politics, etc. This requires an investigative attitude towards the subject matter.

A third set is 'theoretical competences' and refers to the ability of understanding theories, terms and concepts such as 'religion', 'ritual', 'cultural memory', 'modern society', 'integration', and of applying these theoretical tools to empirical observations.

A fourth set is 'communication competences' and involves the ability to communicate information and scholarly findings in an understandable way, taking into account the specificity of the addressees, mediating between those involved in different discourse (i.e. scientific and religious), and acting appropriately in various situations (e.g. conflictual ones), also in accord with scholarly findings. The rationale for these competences lies in the fact that at the root of the problem of coexistence there are often dissonances between religious-based behaviors and their representations by external groups. Finally, the set of 'evaluation competences' involves being able to confront together external representations, self-representations and scientific representations, addressing especially the issue of generalized and prejudiced representations in certain media, which should be evaluated using explicit criteria.

Turning our attention to Alberts (2007, 376-82), we have already seen above how she endorses a concept of religion which is fuzzy enough that narratives and representations of religion in class may include all those phenomena in which the distinction 'religious' *versus* 'non-religious' is blurred. The point is to show pupils the ambivalence of the concept of religion, and not only the positive, domesticated aspects. She recommends an equal treatment for all religions, avoiding the temptation of addressing, for example, primary existential topics in Christianity, while focusing on the 'exotic' sides in Asian religions, or on the 'ancient' side in Greek polytheism. Representations must avoid any kind of universal theology of religions. Instead, both similarities and contrasts should be shown from the perspective of methodological agnosticism. This means that there is no room for any discussions on the issue of truth-claims. A focus on contemporary phenomena is preferable, but an historical perspective is nonetheless needed in order to contextualize them. Pupils should be engaged with a variety of sources: oral, written, visual, material and multimedia, in which the distinction between insiders' representations, outsiders' representations and 'grey' representations (e.g. stereotyped ones) is explicit. Religious traditions should be engaged in comparison with others as well as in themselves, represented in their full complexity: majority-minorities relationships, dynamics of change, fuzzy border of traditions, power relations, small and great narratives inside the tradition. Those aspects considered 'negative' in contemporary contexts must not be ignored but contextualized, taking into account the insider's perspective, while being critically examined on the base of the explicit axiological and educative framework. On a more general-theoretical level, there is first of all the need of developing a me-

ta-language, informed by the theoretical study of religion\s, in order to talk about religion in general. Furthermore, among pivotal component to be considered in the construction of narratives, there are also the dynamics of generation and negotiation of various kind of representations of religions, for example, those involved in the processes of otherization such as Orientalism and Occidentalism.

Concerning this latter point, Alberts (2017b) is particularly critical of the concept of 'world religions' (cf. above, §§ 2.1.5 and 2.1.8). She asks herself: what is the value of a brief overview of the 'usual' five religions to be narrated in their basic aspects? Who decides which are these basic aspects? On which grounds? What kind of idea of religion would this brief overview provide? In this way she highlights the dilemma of a teaching about religions which also aims at providing a critical perspective. In other words, if we want to foster theoretical and ideological criticism on religious data, we are unable to do so without first providing these very data, which are already theoretically and ideologically laden, especially by the paradigm of world religion.

She then suggests a practical solution, which, it should be noted, refers to a university context. However, this does not mean that it should be dismissed as not relevant to our purposes. She proposes having students start from basic competences on theory, methods and issues of perspective/representation within the discipline of the study of religion\s. Only afterwards different introductory accounts of a same religion are engaged, and compared, in order to show that there are different ways to select and present "basic facts, data and terms" (Alberts 2017b, 447) of the same religion. Students are invited to look at the implicit or explicit reasons for these different selections. Next, they replicate the same process, this time addressing more traditions, in order to see if there are differences between the selection of basic facts of a certain religion in respect to others, and what are the possible theoretical and ideological reasons behind. In summary, rather than presenting students with an already selected set of data, Alberts proposes to train the students to reflect on the process of selection itself, an approach which permits the acquisition of the said data at the same time.

Saggioro and Giorda (2011; 2012) basically side with Alberts' suggestions, emphasizing the issue of conflicting narratives, the issue of representation, in particular the discriminating elements and the stereotypization processes, including those present within the religious traditions. Given their proposal of the discipline of the history of religions as the epistemological base for RE, they suggest focusing on geographical and diachronic development of important religious-related phenomena in human history, e.g. the development of Christian churches, Judaism and Islamic migration, or even atheism in modern Euro-American regions. In this regard, they acknowl-

edge the impossibility of avoiding privileging the historical devel-
opment of religious traditions relevant to the contexts in which RE
takes place (i.e. Europe or, more in general, Euro-American regions),
but this does not mean neglecting the contemporary global spread
of other Asian traditions. At any rate, "the challenge lies in dealing
with Christianity in the same way as we would deal with other reli-
gions" (Giorda 2012, 112).

These ideas are operationalized in objectives such as the knowl-
edge of the above-mentioned aspects, as well as the acquisition of all
those theoretical and methodological tools – which are to be included
in the teaching narratives. Such tools are meant to equip pupils with
various competences, so that they may be able to organize the knowl-
edge relative to the history of religion, applying theoretical principles
to actual cases, and even re-elaborating this very knowledge. More
in detail, they suggest aiming at the development of a common me-
ta-language in order to oust Christian-centric terminology and to ad-
dress, from a comprehensive point of view, the differences between
the various technical terms used by insiders. Secondly, they cite the
ability of understanding and interpreting religious texts, religious
symbols, religious language and terminology, and, notably, forms of
interreligious dialogue too.

The last author to be quickly cited as relevant to our discourse
is Jensen, which does not dwell much in detail on the topics of this
section, but he states that one of the most prominent tasks of RE in
school is, in a few words,

> to deconstruct dominant 'folk categories', dominant, normative,
> stereotypical ways of thinking about religion. It is a must in or-
> der to make students familiar with a study-of-religion\s approach
> and to de-familiarize them with religion, not least 'their own'.
> (Jensen 2020, 196)

5.4.2 Discussion and Proposal

Let us start with the issue of the narratives, i.e. the logical sequence
of information pupils are expected to deal with. Employing narra-
tives, as the very word indicates, may well evoke a certain sense
of plot in the mind of the pupils (cf. on this Ryan 1992, esp. 376-8)
and facilitate an essentialized understanding of religious traditions,
which is, furthermore, highly probable given the pervasiveness of the
world religions paradigm (cf. *infra*, § 5.5.1). Therefore, I would pro-
pose to address first the issues in a basic epistemological nature. In
other words, any RE course should start with the explicitation that
what will be explored in class are 'maps', and that "maps are not ter-
ritories" (cf. above, § 2.1.3) but mere tools. A move which is consist-

ent with the nominalist epistemological approach proposed above (§ 2.1.8). This should also be applied to narratives regarding the exploration of abstract theoretical or methodological issues, and to narratives regarding particular religious phenomena.

Keeping on with the metaphors of the map, since there may be various kind of maps (physical, political, road map, etc.), the uses and purposes of the various narratives or representations used by the teachers should be made explicit as well. This is also consistent with Hattie's recommendation (Hattie 2009, cf. also above, § 2.2.4) that clear and detailed objectives of activities should be shared with the pupils.

This proposal of mine is a kind of elaboration of Alberts proposal of critical work with the various representations of world religions. From this latter I maintain the focus of critical awareness of the non-neutrality of representations, without involving an excessive intellectual burden on the side of the pupils, especially the younger ones. By doing so, i.e. justifying and explaining beforehand the choice of narration and representations, a teacher may well use in certain contexts the term 'Shintō' as a meaningful term, while in other contexts s/he may instead problematize it.

Concerning our peculiar objective in framing the theme of Japanese and other East-Asian religions within RE, a first, general recommendation, consistently again with our epistemological stance, is that narratives and representations of these traditions should have two main 'faces': a 'deconstructive' and a 'constructive' one.

The first 'face' should address the issue of the stereotyped/partial representations regarding both religion in general, and Japanese and other East-Asian religions in particular. We have discussed the former in §§ 2.1.5, 2.1.8, and introductory sections in 4.2; the latter in §§ 3.3.2, 3.3.3 and 3.3.4. In this regard, we should keep in mind the already mentioned principles of *problematization* and *historicization*. In other words, pupils should not only learn the stereotyped or partial nature of certain representations, but, especially, the reasons why, and the contexts in which, these representations rose and became pervasive. These topics are, basically, the foundational nuclei of the critical/deconstructive approach. In this way we put the historical development – and errors – of the discipline in the foreground. As we have seen, these issues are intimately connected with broad topics, notably colonization, imperialism, the development of social sciences, and so on, which are closely tied with modernity and the construction of the identity of Euro-American regions *vis-à-vis* the other parts of the worlds. As such, these topics should be highlighted in our narratives and representations. This is not only meant to explore the interdisciplinary borders of RE (especially with history), but it is also functional to our intercultural aims of fostering competences such as critical understanding of the self, the awareness of

one's own biases, and the knowledge of the possible historical causes of these biases (§ 5.2.2).

From the point of view of the construction of narratives, which content should we give priority to? Data from religion or theoretical tools? In reality, this is a kind of false question, as we have already seen that any data are theory-laden (§§ 2.1.2 and 2.1.4). On the base of the above observations, we can say that the choice of deconstructive narratives may offer a way to follow the principle of *balance* between contents, concepts and terminology. Indeed, since deconstructive narratives start from the inadequacy of theoretical paradigms, they permit a dialectical exploration among conceptual elements, terminology (albeit in a critical way) and data from religions.

Deconstructive narratives and representations of Japanese and other East-Asian religions are, from a certain point of view, easier to design and plan because we can rely upon, as points of reference, those partial or stereotyped notions we want to criticize. Indeed, starting from the misconceptions of the pupils (§ 2.2.5; cf. also *infra*, § 5.5), especially when, as Frank suggests, these relate to their everyday experience, and may be functional and effective. However, we have already stated in our discussion of the epistemological dimension that the deconstructive side is not enough. Indeed, from a practical perspective, a deconstructive narrative based on stereotypes may well provide pupils with critical awareness and deep knowledge of certain, specific aspects of Japanese and other East-Asian religions, but this may also fail to provide them with the general picture when framing and contextualizing other specific aspects of these traditions.

How should we construe our positive narratives and representations, then? In my view, Jackson may provide us with fruitful insights thanks to his proposal of a three-layered matrix of representations, which addresses the dimension of the tradition at large, various membership-groups, and the individual. With the caveat, as discussed above, that each of these layers is explicitly presented as a sort of map with different scale, focus and purposes. In addition, in order to be consistent with our critique of the paradigm of religious traditions as discrete, separate entities, we should also add to our scheme other ideas. For example, Chau (2011) suggests focusing on the modalities of practices crosscutting traditions; the 2018 report on English RE invites us to take into account cross-fertilization and the dynamics of change within and between religions; Frank recommends not to forget the relation of religions with other spheres of society and the interplay between self-portrayals of religious communities/individuals and representations by outsiders. Concerning this latter aspect, we have seen (§ 3.3.), in fact, how the interplay of self- and hetero-representations is pivotal in understanding the contemporary situation of East-Asian religions.

This means that, if a teacher is carrying on a lesson using the example of the religious life of individual practitioners, pupils should be given the opportunity – if the example permits – to frame it not only within the layer of membership groups and/or tradition at large, but also within the layers of multiple traditions/membership group through the analytic concept of the modality of practice. These actual practices, then, should be seen in relation to other socio-cultural contexts and should be also analyzed in their different ways of being represented, and the reason why they are so.

Concerning the issue of narratives or 'maps' addressing the layer of religious traditions at large, I agree with Frank's recommendation of avoiding the temptation to give a mere account of theological doctrines. Similarly, I understand Jackson's point that an abstract and brief account of a religious tradition may not be so appealing for pupils in comparison to an account of the religious life of their peers. Nonetheless, due to the deep stratification of orientalist self- and hetero-representations that characterizes East-Asian traditions (§ 3.3), I think that it is, in any case, recommendable to provide pupils with general narratives of these religious traditions. By using 'large scale maps' or narratives in which the religious traditions are *heuristically* essentialized as the 'characters' of a certain 'story', it is possible, for example, to give a general account of historical transformations, including the doctrinal ones. Furthermore, in consideration of the pervasiveness of the paradigm of 'world religions' not only in the starting knowledge of the pupils, but also in the contemporary self-understanding and self-representation of many religious traditions, I suggest that this paradigm should be at least initially exploited – always as a tool – in order to be criticized and amended at a second time.

Of course, there cannot be one single, absolutely right, general narrative of, e.g. 'Buddhism' – not to mention the possible critique that we should instead talk of 'Buddhisms'. On this regard, I think that it is a matter of practical *phronesis* to be applied by the teachers. That is, they should act on the base of their situation, considering that the narratives/maps on traditions at large should be also designed in function of narratives and aspects concerning other layers: membership groups or individual experiences. As a practical general principle, we may say that these general narratives should be construed in a manner that characterizations are flexible enough[2] to accommodate the large possible number of aspects. Several examples

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2   For example, we have seen in §§ 3.2.1.1 and 3.2.2.3 that is possible to speak of *kami* as a flexible concept of superhuman being or to make a heuristic use of the term 'Shintō' in order to show how a nowadays self-conscious tradition, whose antecedents can be traced back even to continental ideas, have historically developed in connection with other religious phenomena like Buddhism, Confucianism and political historical phenomena such as Japanese nationalism.

of these aspects have been already, and aptly, individuated by various SoR-based RE scholars above (§ 5.4.1), which are also relevant for the design of narratives concerning membership groups and individual experiences.

Another general principle to be followed in the creation of constructive narratives and aspects – concerning any kind of layer – is that of *problematization*, which in this case may be translated in the general guideline of envisioning narratives and selecting aspects which permit the activation, by the pupils, of the meta-methods of the study of religion\s (§ 2.1.6 and synopsis in § 5.3.1).

We may also observe that even constructive 'maps' may have critical or deconstructive effects, especially if they revolve around themes and topics which go beyond the stereotypical Christian-centric paradigm, as the already cited idea of acknowledging the possibility of multiple religious adhesions. However, this does not mean that aspects that may also be analyzable under Christian-centric paradigm should be dismissed, for e.g. the role of the rivalry of Daoism and Confucianism against Buddhism in the renowned persecution of 845 in China, or the sectarian development in Tokugawa Buddhism (§ 3.2.1.1).

Similarly, I would recommend, concerning the positive narratives and representations, especially of traditions at large, to be wary of a common mistake which has its roots in the reception of East-Asian religions (and in the Protestant influence as well) (§ 3.3.2). That is, the excessive focus on the 'birth of tradition', on the figure of the founder or on the foundational texts (e.g. the historical Buddha, texts such as *Kojiki*, *Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi*, *Veda* and *Upaniṣad*). Usually, brief general narratives tend to mainly explore the beginnings of a certain traditions, presented as its 'immutable foundations', while addressing further historical development only in a sketchy way, until the moment in which the 'fracture' brought by modernity (e.g. encounter with 'Westerners') takes place. In this way there is the risk of portraying the idea of 'tradition' as still and immutable *versus* the idea of dynamism and change of modernity. However, this does not mean that the important developments brought by modernity should be neglected. On the contrary, given their impact, their complexities, historical span and entanglements should be given much more space to be explored.

On this regard Nye (2019, 13-14) makes a bold proposal, i.e. to use the post-colonial present as "the entry into our engagement with the material. That is, to teach from the present backwards". It is a quite innovative and interesting proposal. To gauge its actual effectiveness, however, it should be experimented in classroom, which adequate planning and with all the necessary scaffolding through various types of resources – our 'maps' – to allow pupils to engage with a narrative that, indeed, goes against a logic of historical development.

It may well be an instance of a narrative which is both constructive and deconstructive in the senses explored above.

Continuing our discussion of narratives and representations of modern and contemporary Japanese and other East-Asian religions – including the development of these traditions in Euro-American contexts –, another important recommendation is to avoid what we have already hinted as the 'antiquarian' trap. That is, to treat the huge historical change in religions brought by modernization and nationalistic agenda as 'inauthentic' or irrelevant. As a matter of fact, this would betray an attitude similar to that of the first orientalists who despised the coeval situation of Asian traditions as superstitious degeneration of the doctrines and texts belonging to a foregone golden era. It is recommended, instead, to highlight the dynamics of modernization and acculturation of East-Asian religions (as we did in § 3.3) in order to avoid, above all, that those aspects which in reality appeal to Euro-American deep-seated assumptions (e.g. emphasis on individuality or psychological dimension) may come to be paradoxically understood as the supposed 'essence' of Asian spirituality. These dynamics should be engaged, on one side, as the present-day examples of normal expansion and acculturation, typical of any religious tradition, to be compared with similar process in the past. On the other side, especially concerning those phenomena which can be framed under the umbrella term of 'spirituality', these dynamics can be addressed as results of much more faster movements of people and information (such as Internet), and of the pervasiveness of neoliberal economical thinking, which fosters processes of commoditization (religious objects and materials becoming commodities) and commodification (non-things, such as persons and religious values becoming commodities/objects for profit) (cf. Carrette 2016). In other words, in our RE proposal, Japanese and other East-Asian traditions should also be observed in their 'dispersed', or 'consumed' form, without preliminary judgment on the issues of 'ethics' or 'authenticity' of said forms.[3] If feelings of discomfort should rise on these issues, a self-critical analysis should ensue to see on which grounds, on which assumptions, on which explicit or implicit values these discomforts arise. This kind of discussion should be addressed within a framework of intercultural and citizenship education, especially in regard to the key issue of negotiable or non-negotiable values (cf. above, § 5.2.2).

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3   As Carrette interestingly observes, there are examples of Asian religious phenomena in which the dimensions of legitimate commoditization and morally disputable commodification are indeed blurred (Carrette 2016, 201, 749-50), an observation consistent with our examination of e.g. contemporary religions of Japan, or of traditional tantrism as provider of 'technical devices' for rulers (cf. above, § 3.2.3.4).

At this point, I think I should make two things clear, which will lead us to other practical observations. First, are these modalities of creating narratives valid or relevant only for Japanese and other East-Asian traditions? Absolutely not. My primary aim is to provide guidance for handling these traditions in RE contexts in such a way that their complexity and their entanglements with Euro-American cultural history can be taken adequately into account. Moreover, I think that a fruitful challenge for RE should not only be, as Giorda says, "dealing with Christianity in the same way as we would deal with other religions" (Giorda 2012, 112), but it should also consist in engaging Christianity, or the religious history of Europe and America in general, as 'exotic traditions'. That is, looking for and highlight in 'our religions' also those aspects that we found conspicuous in our review of East-Asian religions, such as beliefs and practices concerning practical benefits, the corporeal dimension, the manipulative practices, the esoteric aspects, the creative combination of elements from multiple traditions, and so on. Should feeling of puzzlement rise concerning this unusual focus on aspects that one could instinctively label as 'superstitious', this would represent a fruitful occasion to critically and genealogically ask why we instinctively tend to give such judgments.

The second point is that I do not consider these 'tools' of narratives and aspects merely as the contents of frontal lesson in which the teachers provide information to passive pupils. Narratives and aspects may as well be 'discovered' or even 'recreated' by pupils through various didactic methods and adequate preparation of context and resources. Since the relevance of the topic of Japanese and other East-Asian religions is linked to the foregrounding of one's biased views, an active involvement of the pupils and of their starting knowledge, is a logical and effective choice. As observed above, no teaching methods are, in theory, inadequate for the topic of East-Asian traditions. However, from a pragmatic point of view, we should consider the stratified history of deep-seated modern interpretations, self- and hetero-representations of these religions as possible hurdles for free exploratory activities. In other words, individual or group research done through Internet browsing, or through reading certain publications which may appear to be consistent with academic standards, could be instead detrimental if done without any guidance. These observations also lead us to the importance of carefully selecting, presenting, or even creating adequate resources. This is a recommendation proper to any didactic contexts, but in our issue at hand it should be done keeping in mind the indications concerning narratives and aspects discussed up to this point. For example, Jackson's proposal of using the real voices of children as a kind of peer-informants for the pupils-'anthropologists' is a fruitful idea, provided that these voices represent a fairly variegated spectrum of young

practitioners. In Jackson's case, since the fieldwork to collect these voices has been carried out in UK, variety may well not be assured, or modernist aspects of traditions may be overrepresented.[4]

As already observed in § 2.2.4, the individuation of learning objectives is a device meant to ease the planning and the implementation of teaching activities. In what follows, I try to synthetize the issues discussed up to this point by relying on the taxonomy of Anderson et al. (2001). That is, I will indicate in general terms what kind of *factual*, *conceptual*, *procedural*, and *metacognitive knowledge* we may expect pupils to *remember*, *understand*, *apply*, *analyze*, *evaluate* and *create*.

- *Factual Knowledge*:
  - 'Maps' for each of the three layers (traditions at large, membership group, individual).[5]
  - 'Maps' of self- and hetero-representations and the dynamics of their historical entanglements.
  - 'Maps' of the interrelationship between the various layers and processes.
  - Variety and complexity of aspects: oral, written, visual, material and multimedia sources, dynamics of change, fuzzy borders between traditions, power relations, relationship to other spheres of society such as politics, economy, and so on.
  - Technical terms of religious traditions.
  - Technical terms of the study of religion\s.
- *Conceptual Knowledge*:
  - Theoretical concepts and approaches to the study of religion\s.
  - Concepts of Orientalism and Occidentalism.
  - Conceptual understanding of cultural and intercultural complexities and dynamics: cultures as pool of resources of individual identity; cultural groups as internally contested, mutually influencing and changing in time and space; dynamics of power.
- *Procedural Knowledge*:
  - Baseline research methods: developing questions suitable for objects/searching object suitable for posed questions.
  - Meta-methods of *description*, *comparison*, *explanation*, *interpretation classification* and *contextualization*.
  - Preparation, communication and mediating scholarly findings according to type of addressees.

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[4] Cf. the example chosen by Jackson and cited above § 4.5.3. I found worth noting that it deals with "a rural English Thai Forest Hermitage monastery" (2008a, 174), which is an example of modernist development in Theravada (cf. Crosby 2014, 147 ff).

[5] N.B.: in this case the 'individual' is to be considered capable to draw from, or to belong to, different religious traditions at the same time. In other words, for the level of individual Chau's (2011) ideas of modality of doing religions should also be implied.

- *Metacognitive Knowledge*:
  - Methodological agnosticism.
  - Baseline epistemological awareness of the impossibility of a completely neutral or omnicomprehensive perspective and of the heuristic value of 'maps'.
  - Drawing on research findings to act appropriately in situation (e.g. of conflict).
  - Critical understanding of one's own cultural position. In particular, being able to deconstruct and de-familiarize from dominant 'folk categories' and from dominant, normative, stereotypical ways of thinking about religion.

Let us rely on a practical example to see how these objectives on the knowledge-axis can be articulated in the procedural axis of to *remember*, *understand*, *apply*, *analyze*, *evaluate* and *create*.

A teacher may want to introduce pupils, already acquainted with general knowledge on Buddhism and theories of religions, to the case of two persons dealing with Zen Buddhism (may be real persons or fictitious ones). One lives in Japan and resorts to Zen Buddhism for requests of practical benefits and for funerary rites, while addresses his existential problems with a local female shaman, who allow him to get in touch with his deceased father. The other person lives in Europe, is fond of meditation and Buddhist philosophy, and thinks Buddhism should get rid of irrational superstitions. The teacher provides pupils with adequate information and resources among which there are 'maps' of modern developments of Buddhism, information of different cultural-religious context, and so on.

By giving pupils the task of identifying similarities and differences between the two practitioners, the teacher may set the following learning objectives, which will require specific arrangements in the lesson(s): *remembering* and *understanding* 'maps' of modern development of Buddhism both at the 'tradition' and 'individual' level; *applying* theories of religious studies such as ritual communication, self-cultivation or theological elaboration concerning super-empirical entities through the *analysis* of these two cases; *remembering* and *understanding* the concept of internal differences and of contested boundaries within a same tradition; *applying* the meta-methods of comparison and contextualization, interpreting and explaining the differences. The teacher may also set a metacognitive learning objective of *applying* critical self-understanding by having pupils reflect on which kind of practitioner they would instinctively see as more 'authentic', and why.

5.5 The Learning Dimension

5.5.1 Recapitulation, Further Insights and Discussion

In this last section I want to resume those topics discussed in § 2.2.5. We have seen the idea of 'didactic contract' which, among other things, refers to the implicit expectations of the pupils. These are strongly dependent on their own personal experience concerning the nature of the school in general or of one subject in particular. For example, pupils may think of school as the place in which a 'perfect', 'all-rounded' 'truth' about the state of affairs of the world is bestowed upon them. The youngest pupils, especially, may well think that teachers or adults not only 'know best', but even 'know all', which is conductive to the idea of monumental, a-temporal knowledge to be acquired and replicated as-it-is. Similarly, pupils may – predictably – have a limited view on the subject, and we have seen how, in the case of the study of religion\s, and even more in the case of Japanese and other East-Asian religions, there are plenty of reasons (cf. above, §§ 2.1.5, 2.1.8 and 3.3) to expect a certain biased or partial view on the subject.

We also have touched the issue of the creation of 'models', i.e. a stratification of mental images which, upon several inputs, became so elaborated and strong to resist further updates, thus subsuming any new inputs. This model may emerge at the right moment and in accordance with the teacher plan, or, conversely it could consolidate itself in the mind of the pupils before any chance of being further expanded, therefore causing cognitive conflict and hindering future learning. This is linked to the notion of epistemological obstacles, i.e. those knowledges which, in the evolution of key concepts within a discipline, have been useful or effective in that particular moment, but that are of no use when conceptualizing more advanced information. This is the case, for example, with the intuitive notion of the 'sacred' common to any religion that we found in the phenomenological phase of the study of religion\s. Brusseau (2002) warns us about the likelihood that pupils will probably face hindrances similar to those encountered in the historical evolution of the discipline.

On the background of these observations, we have discussed (cf. above, §§ 4.5.3 and 4.5.4) Jackson's idea of *reflexivity*. We observed how *reflexivity*'s elements of *constructive criticism* and *edification* are highly consistent with the educational and instructional aims of our proposal of RE. They are clearly pivotal in the development of critical self-reflection on the dominant ideas concerning religion in general and Asian religions in particular, especially for what concerns the exploration of: 1) those aspects of Japanese and East-Asian religions that go against the grain of Euro-centric ideas of religions; and

2) the historical-cultural reasons for current representations of East-Asian religions. Therefore, even if it is a learning process in which teachers cannot but devolve towards the learner (cf. above, § 2.2.1), teaching arrangements should be carefully crafted in particular to ease these two pivotal processes.

However, we found problematic the attempt of the 'interpretative-dialogical' approach to treat *reflexivity* as eminently "personal to the student" (Jackson 2008, 175), and to combine critical reflection on epistemological, ethical and political issues, with personal issues of religious/existential/identity-related nature. We stressed that pupils' needs, interests, reasons for motivation and, above all, models of understanding 'religion' and, especially, East-Asian religions, will be likely informed by a modern and orientalist understanding of them. Therefore, this somehow runs against our ideas of exploring those aspects of Japanese and other Asian religions in order to deconstruct this very contemporary understanding and opening space for intercultural and self-critical reflections.

I suspect that the numerous discussions about personal/spiritual/existential/identity issues, that constantly pop up in the various English RE approaches and institutional frameworks, point more or less to the classic 'elephant in the room' of RE. That is, the fact that RE teachers are expected to teach about religions in a situation where it is highly probable that pupils have already a well-defined, and very diversified idea, not only of what religion is, but also of what it *ought* to be: Christianity, Islam, an irrational behavior to be suppressed, spirituality outside corrupted institutions, and so on. Various factors may be behind this variety of ideas: family acculturation, personal choices, the process of building one's own cultural, social or ethnic identity, and so on.

As in the case of 'life questions pedagogy' in Swedish RE (cf. above, § 4.5.4), this emphasis on – supposedly neutral – existential issues may have been considered to be a kind of strategy to address simultaneously religious, a-religious and anti-religious pupils. Another way of tackling this issue is that of the theological-rational approach, which aims to equip pupils with philosophical skills in order to enable them to assess, defend (or even change) on rational grounds their own position, be it a religious one, one relative to a precise tradition, or an atheist one. This is an operation which, we have seen, comes at the cost of permitting only limited and problematic representations of religion (§ 5.3.2).

The perspective of the SoR-based RE scholars in this regard is quite straightforward, and refers to one of the methodological pillars of the study of religion\s, which is methodological agnosticism, i.e. approaching religions *etsi deus non daretur*, as phenomena totally explicable as a human creation. Jensen, for example, quite explicitly affirms that

the pupils/students, when entering the classroom enter as pupils and students (not as, for example, atheists, 'nones', Christians, Muslims, or Buddhists). (Jensen 2019, 44)

I do agree without hesitation to this key principle, and indeed I have indicated methodological agnosticism (cf. above) as a metacognitive knowledge that pupils need to acquire when dealing with RE. Probably, *methodological atheism* would be a more logically coherent term, as it indicates to consider any super-empirical cause as not existent.

However, in order to cause less tension among pupils with attitude towards supernatural realities, I pragmatically suggest using the wording 'methodological agnosticism'. This term should highlight the fact that in RE we are playing a different (language) game, whose rules are not affected by the fact that super-empirical realities exist or not. Meylan (2015) too is aware of possible tension and cognitive conflicts that may afflict some pupils. These latter may indeed find themselves in a situation in which they are supposed to keep their beliefs about the existence of super-empirical realities, while, at the same time, accept the idea that religions that speak of these realities are exclusively men-made. Indeed, although he draws on Lincoln's approach to religion, he nonetheless thinks that Lincoln's famous statement: "Reverence is a religious, and not a scholarly virtue. When good manners and good conscience cannot be reconciled, the demands of the latter ought to prevail" (Lincoln 1996, 226), "must obviously be nuanced in the context of compulsory schooling" (Meylan 2015, 91). His solution is consonant with our discussion concerning the use of 'maps'. He proposes emphasizing the fact that concepts used in the study of religion\s are heuristic and of secondary order, i.e. centered around a theoretical object which is superordinated in regard to the various historical, contingent forms of religions. In this way pupils understand the difference between the uses of their native, commonsense and particular usage of religion (and related concept) from the use of the second-order, theoretical concepts about religion. Consequently, "the student's experience must therefore be subordinated to the constructed concept, a concept that can in no way correspond exactly to any experience" (92). The study of religion\s approach, then, would prevent pupils to engage in this subject through the exploration of the issue of truth-claims, which is instead a key point in the theological-rational approach, and it is not explicitly excluded in the interpretative approach. Indeed, for Jackson the question of truth and value should be left open to be pursued as a part of religious education (Jackson 1997, 122), while for O'Grady it should not be excluded but instead addressed through critical and philosophical tools (O'Grady 2019, 193).

Nonetheles, while the importance of methodological agnosticism in a SoR-based RE remains undiscussed, I think it is wise, from a pragmatic point of view, to consider that there is a high probability

that young pupils will engage in RE also with a personal, intimate interest. Judging from the strong emphasis on the personal dimension that characterize many varieties of RE, and not only English RE, I am doubtful that this issue can be dismissed very easily by merely upholding the necessity of a scientific approach. Even a strong advocate of an objective and detached approach as Jensen concedes that:

> If not for a more than 'purely' scientific fascination when reading the Homeric epics and the works of scholars like V. Grønbech and M. Eliade, I had never become a scholar of religion. Some religious texts and scholarly works, [...] may happen to open eyes and bodies for alternative ways of seeing and living. This *cannot* and *ought not* to be totally avoided when discussing RE. (Jensen 2008, 136)

Similarly, we have already seen (§ 5.2.1) that Giorda and Saggioro go even further and affirm that the theme of personal development of the pupils, included their own quest for meaning, should not be completely dismissed from the horizon of RE's aims (Giorda, Saggioro 2011, 143). Indeed, Nigris (2013, 60-1) observes how any kind of knowledge contains 'aesthetics' and 'emotive' dimensions which inevitably enter in the personal construction of the pupil's meaning. I would argue that this is even more the case of a subject such as RE.

How do these observations relate with our topic at hand, i.e. teaching Japanese and other East-Asian religions? In addition to what we have examined in § 3.3, I would remind *en passant* of the existence of a vast body of publications and information in general, both scholarly and not scholarly ones, devoted to the exploration of the intellectual, psychological, 'spiritual' aspects of East-Asian traditions, often in comparison or dialogue with Euro-American philosophical and theological thinking. Therefore, I suspect that the topic of Japanese and other East-Asian traditions would surely draw the interest of pupils looking for resource in order to build their own worldview, with or without reference to super-empirical realities. On a personal note, this is what I, a convinced agnostic, have experienced while studying Buddhism for the first time. Indeed, especially for Buddhism, we should consider the fact that the notion that 'Buddhism is a philosophy, not a religion' is "undoubtedly the most widespread idea relating to Buddhism, even among academics" (Faure 2009, 27). Moreover, we should also take into account the contemporary *milieu* regarding 'spirituality', especially in its dimension of syncretic, free creation of highly personal religious worldviews, which often are not even considered 'religious' by their very creators. We have also seen how it is very common for East-Asian religions to be considered and creatively interpreted in such modalities (cf. above, §§ 3.2.4 and 3.3).

In other words, we may not be wrong in expecting that some pupils will be personally interested in Japanese and other East-Asian reli-

gions, especially as alternatives to Christianity, or even to 'religion' *tout-court*. Similarly, we should also consider the fact that even pupils already practicing or adhering to certain religions may have analogous interests. This can be especially expected for what concerns those aspects of Asian traditions which may be easily understood as 'techniques' freely transferable, e.g. meditation (§ 3.3.4). How should a teacher deal with the expectations and motivations of pupils? If s/he hastily dismissed them, it would be detrimental for the motivations of pupils, who would not see acknowledged their own personal experience coming from outside the school context. Secondly, we would miss the opportunity to stimulate pivotal metacognitive functions, such as the reconfiguration of previous knowledge in relation to new inputs (§ 2.2.5). I will try to deal with these issues in my proposal.

5.5.2 Proposal

Consistently with our nominalist epistemological approach, and with our idea of RE as provider of 'maps' to help pupils navigate the various religious traditions, I would recommend that teachers devote some time, especially at the onset of the course, to explicitly explain and discuss the 'didactic contract' that pupils may have in mind, even unconsciously. That is, to discuss what RE is supposed to be or not supposed to be. For example, it should be clarified that it is not an intellectual venue in which religious traditions are compared in evaluative terms, i.e. deciding on rational, ethical or whatever ground, which one has the best or more compelling truth-claims or ethical norms. I do not intend with this that in RE evaluative judgment cannot be made, but these must be done in tandem with the explicitation and discussion of the underlying value framework (§ 5.2). Furthermore, this kind of evaluative discussion should be done on specific, empirical cases, not to abstract issues such as 'the concept of Dao' or 'the value of meditation', as it would risk the essentialization of traditions. Secondly, coherence should be sought with the principle of avoiding the representation of the scholarly subject (in this case the study of religion\s), as a sort of monumental knowledge. Therefore, RE should be presented, in the didactic contract, not as the real 'Truth' about all the various traditions – as it would mean to treat it as a sort of 'meta-religion' – but as a knowledge that permits pupil to interpret and respond to this phenomenon in the most neutral way possible. Similarly, RE should not be considered in competition with insiders' interpretations for what concerns the issue of super-empirical realities. At the same time, however, the possibility of tensions on empirical grounds must be acknowledged (cf above the TWB factors in § 2.1.6).

While this propaedeutical operation may be useful to clarify or curb possible initial misinterpretation of RE, it is reasonable to think

that teachers cannot completely envision and preemptively dealt with all the possible expectations, misconceptions and epistemological obstacles of the pupils. This is why a certain degree of *phronesis* or practical wisdoms is required on the part of the teacher. S/he should be constantly aware of these key issues in the learning process of the pupils. In this regard, the constant feedback from pupils, e.g. those gained through the use of logs or interviews as done by O'Grady (§ 4.5.3), may support teachers in individuating what pupils expect, what may motivate them, and which misconceptions should be tackled and how. Let us hypothesize that one of the 'misconceptions' of the pupils consist of their expectation of learning Buddhism or Daoism as coherent systems of thought and ethics, characterized by clearly identifiable doctrinal points. Systems from which these pupils hope to gain precise existential or philosophical guidance for their lives. Should these interests remain half-satisfied because, as Frank suggests, doctrines should be dealt with only insofar they are relevant to interpreting and explaining social phenomena? Should these aspirations be completely dismissed, because they are based on essentialist and orientalist readings?

Before answering, I would lay out first some pros and cons in this regard. As we have just observed, this personal kind of reading runs the risk of replicating and strengthening orientalist stereotypes and, from a practical point of view, also reduces the time to explore other aspects, which may thus end up being interpreted as less relevant. However, there are some factors that go against a straightforward dismissal of this kind of personal interest by the pupils. These are the followings: an increase in motivation fueled by personal involvement and by seeing acknowledged, albeit partially, one's own starting perspective; the occasion to reflect on pupils' misconceptions and update them into feasible knowledge; the observation that, in a perspective of balanced treatment of Japanese and other East-Asian religious traditions, there is no reason to overlook those aspects which can be analyzed from a philosophical, ethical or 'existential' perspective; lastly, the fact that also this latter kind of operation may have an inherent intercultural value.

On the basis of these factors, my answer to the question "should we allow pupils to *learn from* East-Asian religious traditions?" is a qualified "yes", and this qualification lies in the skill and experience of the teacher to gauge, on the basis of his/her actual context, whether or not the choice of having pupils learning *from religion*, instead of learning *from the study of religion\s*, is more detrimental or advantageous. For example, how much this kind of approach would draw resources (time, energy, attention) from other aspects of RE? As a rule of the thumb, I would recommend teachers not to proactively encourage this kind of approach. Should the teacher decide also to explore these territories, maybe in cooperation with a colleague who is

teaching ethics or philosophy, I would propose some observations and recommendations. These are nothing but a rough sketch of a discussion that would deserve much more space. However, they also imply a gradual shift in the fuzzy border between epistemological frames, from the frame of the study of religion\s to the frames of comparative intellectual history and of comparative or intercultural philosophy.[6] Therefore, I will limit myself to just a few practical remarks.

In principle, there is no reason to avoid dealing with very specific examples (e.g. the idea of *shikantaza*, 'just sitting', of Sōtō founder Dōgen, 1200-1253) or very broad generalizations (e.g. the concepts of *dao* or *michi* in China and in Japan) of what a religious tradition may feature in terms of ethical, metaphysical, epistemological, ontological questions and answers. However, especially if these features are extrapolated out of their cultural, social, and historical contexts to be compared, analyzed and discussed in a different context, the 'artificiality' and the purposes of the whole operation must be explicit. This means that pupils must be conscious that we have chosen and created *ad hoc* these particular examples or broad generalizations because they are relevant to interests which are different from the interests of the study of religion\s. If these latter may be roughly stated as "how can we make sense of these phenomena that historically have been defined as religions?", the aims of this new operation may be: "what can we learn of relevant to our present needs from these phenomena?". This means, furthermore, that pupils must be conscious that both specific examples and broad generalizations cannot be valid in the whole tradition and throughout its entire historical development. This applies even more to the interpretations of these specific examples or broad generalizations that might take place in class.

Let us recall the example from Erricker (§ 4.4.3), in which a pupil interprets an image of *Śiva naṭarāja* as "a symbol to show that my life is always changing" (Erricker 2010, 104). If a pupil were to ask whether this statement is 'Hinduist' or not, the teacher should refrain from giving an answer, explaining that it is not the scholar's job to attest to the 'authenticity' or orthodoxy of a tradition; Then instead the teacher should take the occasion to engage a discussion on the dynamics of change, development and definition of what is orthodoxy and heterodoxy within a tradition. Keeping on with the same example, I propose that, differently from Erricker, a similar statement from a pupil is relevant to RE's purposes only insofar as it shows how religious ideas can change and evolve, and how the historical-cultural contexts strongly influence this process. In the example at hand, the various layers of meaning of *Śiva naṭarāja* (cosmological, mythi-

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[6] On this regards cf., among others, Kasulis 2002; Pasqualotto 2008; Ghilardi 2012; Ma, Van Brakel 2016.

cal, eschatological, artistic) are 'modernized', de-mythologized and translated to a personal plane of reference ("my life is always changing"), a process consistent with many other contemporary developments in religions. Similarly, questions and discussions concerning metaphysical issues such as the existence or not of super-empirical realities are not proper, as they will involve a breach of the principle of methodological agnosticism.

Specific examples or broad generalization may well be compared with others coming from other historical and cultural contexts. The more the lessons shift towards these kind of topics, the more it should be emphasized that we are moving from a study of socio-cultural phenomena, such as the study of religion\s, to a comparative study of intellectual history or, even more abstractly, to a practice of intercultural philosophy, which has its own presuppositions, methods, aims and limitations, even if fruitful links can be made with the study of religion\s. Concerning the topic of East-Asian religious traditions, and their philosophical relevance, I would recommend taking insights from the ideas of Kasulis (2002) as a possible example of theoretical and methodological guidance. I choose this author in particular because of his relevance in terms of intercultural education.[7] To substantiate my claim I need to give a sketchy account of his study.

Kasulis' basic assumptions and argumentation are as follows: every human being can relate with the world in a variety of ways, but only certain ones come to be acknowledged as rational or persuasive, not because of an intrinsic degree of truth or correctness, but because of cultural, social and historical contexts, and it is the persistence through inter-generational transmissions of these ways of relating to the world that sanctions their cogency. Changes of paradigms, of course, may well happen, but are long processes. How many modalities of relation with the world may exist? We cannot know. Kasulis, throughout his career as a scholar of Japanese thought, identifies a recurring pattern that he calls "intimacy". In this pattern of thinking, things and humans exist in a situation of internal relationship, that is, the existence of one term of the relation ontologically influences the other term. On the basis of this elementary scheme, a coherent series of epistemological, metaphysical, aesthetical, political and ethical approaches emerges. In the case of epistemology, to know an object from the point of view of intimacy implies being in a relation of intimate relationship with it. For instance, in order to know what clay is, one should become a potter, not a geologist. It implies practical apprenticeship under a master, not study from books. To gauge whether a certain potter knows adequately about clay, one has to be a potter himself. It is, therefore, an esoteric form of knowl-

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7   For a discussion of Kasulis's intercultural relevance see Lapis 2015.

edge, limited only to those who have undergone similar training and similar experiences. Kasulis tries to explain the difficulties and that feeling of puzzlement we may experience in trying to make sense of different ways of behaving or reasoning, such as those we can find in Japanese culture, by pointing to the fact that our (modern, Euro-American) pattern of thinking of reference, which he calls "integrity", is based on very different premise. In this pattern of thinking, things are instead externally related and thus mutually independent. From an integrity perspective, then, it is the geologist who knows best clay, and his knowledge can be publicly verified by means of e.g. empirical experiment, performed by whatever person, provided that s/he has the right instructions.

Notwithstanding the declared heuristic and construed nature of the two devices of intimacy and integrity, Kasulis's approach has its shortcomings, as it runs the risk of excessive simplification, essentialization and de-historification of Japan and of the too general notion of 'modern West', as he calls it. However, I think that it is still highly valuable, because Kasulis does not simply equate Japan with intimacy and 'modern West' with integrity, but instead he affirms that these two patterns can be found in both regions. The difference is that those patters are alternatively foregrounded or put in the background, in terms of recognized importance, accordingly to cultural contexts. That is, also a 'modern westerner' may reason from a perspective of intimacy, but for highly relevant matter s/he probably would resort to the integrity perspective. As a matter of fact, when Kasulis explains the pattern of intimacy with practical examples, he does not resort to images of 'mystical', 'oriental' masters initiating their disciple through esoteric devices, but uses examples common to our (modern, Euro-American) experience. For instance, a panel of judges evaluating an athletic or artistic performance. We may do not know how they reached their verdict, since we do not have the intimate knowledge of that discipline, but we usually consider the agreement among different and experienced judges, if not 100% objective, at least reliable.

Why Kasulis's approach is relevant to our discussion? I think that he offers a general framework for intercultural comparison between traditions of thought – but not limited to this – highly consistent with what we have discussed so far. In a situation when pupils confront themselves with 'exotic' ways of thinking and behaving such as those of East-Asian traditions, there are two fundamental risks. First, to look for an *ex oriente lux* which, we have seen in § 3.3, may well reveal itself as modern Euro-American influences veiled by an 'oriental' aura. Secondly, they may essentialize East-Asian religious traditions as the completely opposite of Euro-American religious traditions. As a matter of fact, we explored in § 3.2 how certain aspects of East-Asian traditions may represent a challenge to modern, Christiano-centric

paradigms. However, Kasulis's approach reminds us to look back to our own cultural and historical background and see if and how similar topics – multiple religious affiliations, the body, esoteric knowledge, quest for practical benefits – can be found also in our cultural history and ask ourselves how and why these came to be seen as being not relevant compared to other aspects.

In a few words, Kasulis approach may help us in understanding the cultural 'Other' while at the same time shading different light on ourselves. This means recognizing the implicit, often unconscious, assumptions and paradigms. It means also addressing the complexities, the differences, and the similarities, along with the acknowledgment not only of the possibilities, but also of the limitations of intercultural interactions, which may be engendered by the difficulties of harmonizing opposite implicit basic assumptions such as those of *intimacy* and *integrity*.

5.6 Final Conclusions

In the introduction of the present work we hypothesized that the theme of Japanese and other East-Asian religious traditions could be relevant in analyzing established non-confessional RE, such as the English one, in order to reveal possible hidden spots, unquestioned assumptions and problematic areas. Consequently, this work would represent also a contribution to the field of SoR-based RE, especially for what concerns normative research, as the arguments provided would further corroborate the underlying principles of SoR-based RE, discussing in detail its aims and adding new perspectives.

By employing certain topics of Japanese and other East-Asian religious traditions as a sort of litmus test, we found that English RE, in its various articulations (general frameworks, single approaches) still present several shortcomings that, from the point of view of the study of religion\s, hinder a well-rounded understanding of the complex phenomena called religions. These problems pertain to various levels: theoretical-conceptual, content-related and educational. At the theoretical level, there are still concepts of religion leaning too much towards a modern-Protestant idea of religions as coherent set of beliefs and practices, as in the case of the rational-theological approach. Such beliefs and practices are still taken as main indicators of the peculiar 'essence' of that religious tradition. We have seen, for example, that the existential-instrumental approach still cannot avoid treating East-Asian religious traditions as essentially existential/philosophical, while other traditions are treated as more bent towards 'doctrine' or 'practice'. This, of course, is reflected also in the choice of contents or the ways of representing the religious traditions. Consequently, in the case of East-Asian traditions, these

do not go beyond a clichéd focus on doctrinal issues such as *karma*, *saṃsāra*, *trimūrti* or practices such as meditation, ignoring many other important aspects of East-Asian religions or anything that cannot be framed within the world religious paradigm, such as the close interrelationship between Shintō and Buddhism, both historically and in terms of contemporary practice. What is completely ignored, in terms of contents – a shortcoming which indeed can explain a good deal of this situation – are all those historical and cultural dynamics that brought 'religion' to be uncritically considered a universal trait of mankind. We have seen how East-Asian religions have been directly involved in these same cultural dynamics.

A process which, furthermore, greatly influenced the way in which these traditions have been hetero- and self-represented in modern and contemporary times. The paradigm of religion as mainly an individual, inner, intellectual or existential issue – and the supposed universality thereof – influences RE not only at the level of contents, but even in its educational perspective. We have seen how the spiritual/personal development of the pupil, the so-called 'learning from religion', is unproblematically taken as an aim of RE. Once scrutinized through the lens of contemporary research on religions, and East-Asian religions in particular, this educational aim shows its shortcomings and its non-universal genealogy, revealing how it would elicit instead a perpetuation of orientalist stereotypes.

With this I do not intend that nothing valuable can be learn from English RE. We have seen how certain ideas from the interpretative approach, such as the three-layered matrix of representation or the insight that exploring others' worldviews may open new perspectives on one's own worldview, are extremely relevant to our purposes. Similarly, the emphasis on personal involvement of the pupils warns us that RE probably will not works properly if engaged as a totally distant, 'cold' discipline.

The conclusions on English RE that we reached, through the lens of Japanese and other East-Asian religions, are, as we have seen, mostly critical. Thus, it clearly seems that the main contribution that this 'lens' can offer to the construction of a SoR-based RE can be defined as a 'critical/deconstructionist corrective'. That is, the relevance of the theme of Japanese and other East-Asian religions consists in assuring that, in a SoR-based RE, all the complexities, the theoretical problems and the historical entanglements which are necessarily involved in dealing with 'religion' and 'religions' are duly considered. This theme of East-Asian traditions provides several interesting examples through which we can fruitfully explore all those topics coming from the critical/deconstructionist trend of the study of religion\s: the Protestant paradigm of religion, the importance of those aspects obscured by this paradigm (multiple affiliations, the corporeal dimension, the issues of power), and other pivotal issues such as the his-

torical-intellectual relationships between religion, colonialism, Orientalism, and Occidentalism.

At the same time, the topic of Japanese and other East-Asian religions offers an occasion to reflect on how we may deal constructively with religion in RE, and how we may think of an approach as inclusive as possible of all those complexities and problems highlighted by the 'deconstructive' approach. Moreover, this topic has revealed an interesting relevance and usefulness to intercultural educational aims. The model discussed in this chapter, basically, tries to give a practical form to all these observations. Let us summarize it in its key points.

The axiological/educational framework, i.e. the choice concerning which values, and which dimensions of social and cultural life should pupils be introduced to, is characterized as intercultural and citizenship education. This means that learning *about religions*, *from the study of religion\s*, and, in some case, also *from religions*, is meant to foster in pupils the competences of understanding cultural complexities, of developing a constructive attitude to it, and of being critically self-conscious of both other culture and one's own cultural background. This latter competence also entails being vigilant on one's own cultural positioning, biases and various dynamics of representations of both self and others. Concerning the competence of critical understanding of the self, a key point here is the capacity of foregrounding one's own underlying value framework that should form the conscious ground on which cultural negotiation should take place. A key reference for this axiological/educational aspect of the model is the 2018 CoE *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture*.

The epistemological dimension of the model aligns itself with the axiological/educational framework by emphasizing the cultural positionality of the model itself, which works on self-conscious modern and Euro-American assumptions. On the base of these latter, in fact, 'religion' is explicitly adopted as a problematic concept and as a heuristic tool. The 'genealogical/deconstructive' epistemological side of this model aims at highlighting the cultural and historical entanglements of the concept of religion, which are considered an important component of the knowledge represented by study of religion\s. The 'constructive' epistemological dimension aims at offering an open-ended definition of 'religion' and of related terms, of which it tries to grasp the specificity while leaving at the same time the possibility of embracing the highest empirical variety possible. Both sides push to go beyond the limitations of a modern-Protestant paradigm. The 'genealogical/deconstructive' side is related, among other things, to the educational aim of fostering critical skill of understanding of the self. The 'constructive' side is related to the educational aim of providing tools to deal with cultural complexities.

The above-mentioned two dimensions can be articulated in actual practice following some general guidelines. For example, pupils

should be aware that they will not be provided with 'complete, absolute knowledge' but with 'maps' which help them to navigate between 'religion' and 'religions'. The narratives and representations provided by these maps should feature aspects useful to deconstruct partial or stereotypical images of religions, and permit the construction of a well-rounded, reasonable idea of how religion, religions and representations of religions work at various levels: of the individual, of the membership group(s), and of traditions at large. Enough space should be allowed to modern and contemporary contexts, avoiding the 'antiquarian trap' of focusing on the beginning or of despising those creative elaborations which take place e.g. within contemporary spirituality. Any kind of teaching methodology can be fruitfully applied. The only possible caveat is to avoid excessively free (i.e not-guided) explorative activities but to provide instead guidance and well-selected or crafted resources. The reason for this is that the possibility of encountering partial or stereotypical information, especially on East-Asian religions, is high, even from supposedly reliable sources.

Concerning the learning dimension of the model, I have focused on the possible implicit expectations and misconceptions that pupils may have. These can be linked to stereotyped ideas of what 'religion' is and what 'religions' are. Furthermore, these expectations and 'misconceptions' may also be connected with the personal attitude of the pupil, which may be religiously or anti-religiously connotated. For this reason, the importance of propaedeutically discussing the principle of methodological agnosticism is stressed. A slightly similar issue is the expectations and motivations about learning from religion, especially when exotic and appealing topics such as Japanese and other East-Asian religions are involved. I have suggested that to straightforwardly dismiss these expectations may be more detrimental than useful, and suggested that a careful approach, based on the methods of intercultural philosophy, may be taken into consideration. In particular, the work of Kasulis (2002) is suggested as it is highly consistent with the intercultural aims of this model.

There are some aspects of this study that should have deserved much more attention, while other relevant topics have not been dealt with. This provides us with indication for future investigations. For example, a much more in-depth discussion of contemporary transformations of Japanese and other East-Asian religions would surely have benefited the general argument. How have these traditions taken roots in Euro-American contexts in terms of institutions? How is this affecting the way these traditions are represented and practiced? How are East-Asian religious institutions interacting with other traditions on topics of global relevance, such as economy or ecological crisis? In which ways do contemporary spiritual seekers draw creatively from the cultural resources represented by these religions? How is the knowledge of these traditions shared and negotiated, for

example through the Internet? More importantly, how may all of this affect the expectations and misconceptions of pupils in RE, and how could this situation be constructively exploited?

Other shortcomings refer to the limitation to the single case study of English RE. Analyzing the situation of other non-confessional RE would have brought further interesting insights. How is the 'life-questions pedagogy' of Swedish RE actually employed in regard to Japanese and other East-Asian religions? How does this affect the conceptualization and representation of religion in general and East-Asian traditions in particular? Which didactic and educational results are expected? Apart from Swedish RE and other non-confessional RE which are supposed to be based on the study of religion\s, such as the Danish or Estonian RE, there is also the interesting case of France. In this case there is no provision of a separate school subject, but the topic of the *faits religieux* is to be explored in other subjects, such as geography or history. How is or could be the topic of East-Asian religions engaged in such a situation? What would be the advantages or disadvantages? Another interesting venue of investigation is represented by RE-related discourses and practices at the European or even international level. This is particularly relevant from the perspective of a SoR-based RE, which aspire to go beyond the individual State-religions relationships and their repercussions even on non-confessional RE. In this case we do not have only supranational recommendations such as the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* of the OSCE/ODIHR (2007) or the *Signposts: Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-religious Worldviews in Intercultural Education* of the CoE (2014). There are also a variety of individual, grass-roots practical initiatives or research projects funded by programs of the European Commission such as Erasmus+ or Horizon.[8] Outside Europe, interesting developments in RE are taking place in Quebec, the US and South Africa. Finally, other stimulating inquiry could involve the analysis of how Japanese and other East-Asian religions are engaged as a school subject in those contexts in which they do not represent a cultural 'other', but instead belong to what is perceived as the mainstream tradition, i.e. in Japan, in China or in India.

From the point of view of didactics, further insights would have been gained, especially for what concerns the teaching and learn-

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[8]   On a side note, the Author has been actively involved in Erasmus + funded projects aimed at providing European upper-secondary school teachers with tools and resources to carry on lessons based on topics on study of religions, with the objective of improving intercultural competences. These projects are *IERS – Intercultural Education through Religious Studies* (https://iers.unive.it/) and *SORAPS – Study of Religions Against Prejudices & Stereotypes* (https://soraps.unive.it/). These projects would probably have been developed differently had the present research been carried out in advance.

ing dimensions, if the issue of docimology had also been considered, i.e. the study of the theory and practice of evaluation and assessment (tests, oral exams, collective project evaluation, etc.). However, this limitation is also due to the explicit theoretical approach of the present work, which indeed aims at providing the general framework in which elaborating and testing future practical developments. In this regard, a logical next step should be the assessment of the quality and feasibility of our model through the development of new syllabi, resources, activity plans, evaluation grids, and so on. These should be then tested in classroom, taking into consideration not only the age of pupils but – if applicable – the typology of the school and the connection with other subjects. Various types of data from pupils should be collected, such as interaction in class, interviews, performance, and so on. Issues such as expectations, motivations, personal evaluations should be considered. Cooperation with other teachers would be surely of importance, as it would help to shed light on another issue that has not been dealt with, i.e. which kind of training teachers should undergo to properly and fruitfully carry on SoR-based RE classes.