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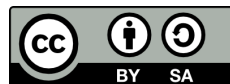
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# A Model for Teaching Asian Religions at School Designing Religious Education Starting from Challenges to Eurocentrism

Giovanni Lapis

**Research on Asian religions has represented a challenge to the study of religion and chance for rethinking it. Therefore, this article aims to reflect on the teaching of religions at school by starting from the challenges that Asian religions pose, such as their resistance to the Christian-centric paradigm of religion and their modern and contemporary developments that work in close relationship with hegemonic Western views of religion. This reflection is offered in concrete terms through the proposal of a flexible model for teaching Asian religions that covers the dimensions of axiology, epistemology, teaching, and learning. Theoretical discussion grounding the model and its practical indications are presented.**

Les recherches sur les religions asiatiques ont représenté un défi pour l'étude des religions et une chance de la repenser. Cet article vise donc à réfléchir à l'enseignement sur les religions à l'école en partant de défis que posent les religions asiatiques, tels que leur résistance au paradigme christianocentré de la religion et leurs développements modernes et contemporains qui fonctionnent en étroite relation avec les visions occidentales et hégémoniques de la religion. Cette réflexion se concrétise par la proposition d'un modèle flexible d'enseignement des religions asiatiques qui couvre les dimensions de l'axiologie, de l'épistémologie, de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage. La discussion théorique qui fonde le modèle et ses indications pratiques font l'objet d'une présentation.

Die Erforschung asiatischer Religionen stellte für die Religionswissenschaft eine Herausforderung dar, bot aber auch die Chance, die Religionswissenschaft neu zu bestimmen. Dieser Beitrag nimmt die Herausforderungen als Ausgangspunkt, etwa den Widerstand asiatischer Religionen gegenüber dem christentumszentrierten Religionsparadigma und dessen modernen und zeitgenössischen Entwicklungen, die eng mit hegemonialen westlichen Vorstellungen von Religion verbunden sind, und reflektiert den schulischen, religionskundlichen Unterricht. Diese Überlegungen werden konkretisiert durch den Vorschlag eines flexiblen Modells für den Unterricht über asiatische Religionen, das die Dimensionen der Axiologie, Epistemologie, Lehre und des Lernens in den Blick nimmt. Theoretische Diskussionen zur Fundierung des Modells und praktische Hinweise werden vorgestellt.

## 1 Introduction

The critical study of extra-European, particularly Asian religions (but not exclusively, see the case of South Africa in Chidester, 2014), as informed by postcolonial/deconstructive critiques, have helped rethink the field of the study of religions. Case studies on East, South, and South-East Asian religions (hereafter: Asian religions) showed how a modern, commonsensical idea of "religion" does not apply in these regions (see, e.g., Chau, 2011; King, 2017; Lopez, 1998; Turner & Saleminck, 2015). This line of research has also illustrated how a commonsensical understanding of Asian traditions is influenced by the historical, cultural, and political entanglements with the Euro-American worlds on the very issue of "religion" (see, e.g., App, 2010; Josephson, 2015), contributing to the awareness of the historical and cultural particularity of this concept (Fitzgerald, 2000; Masuzawa, 2005). Given this illuminative (but not exclusive) role of the topic of "Asian religions," can one draw lessons of relevance to the issue of teaching religions?

The aim of the present article is to address the theoretical and practical implications of thinking about Religious Education (RE) through the focus on Asian religions, especially those from India, China, and Japan. This will be done by developing a four-dimensional model that discusses theoretical points and translates them into operative indications concerning why and how teaching East Asian religions. The point is not merely to offer a model for teaching a limited set of religions nor to situate such teaching in a particular context, be it Switzerland or elsewhere. My aim is to provide an opportunity to think about RE from the perspective offered by an extra-European, challenging topic, in order to achieve an even more inclusive and self-critical perspective. Hopefully, it would also provide inspiration for other scholars to think about RE from the perspective of other extra-European religions.

Below, I will outline my concept of four-dimensional "model" and then address each one of the four dimensions. The relevance of the topic of Asian religions will be discussed in connection with three "challenges" that such topic brings in, in connection with their pertinent dimensions. The conclusion summarizes the key points of the present article.

## 2 Concept and structure of the “model”

In didactics, the concept of “model” features a considerable level of polysemy, especially after the general theoretical shift from the general paradigm of cognitivism to that of constructivism. The previous idea of a model as a rigid structure governed by linearity and abstract rationality has gradually been challenged by an idea of a model based on a logic of complexity, which implies nonlinearity, circularity of procedures, and interrelationships between elements of the didactic process (Sarracino, 2013). Perla considered it a “structure of mediation between theory and practice, which provides a simplified and partial representation of the didactic activity” (2013, p. 37). According to Damiano, 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, p. 164).

For our discussion, it is useful to conceptualize the object of the study of didactics, that is, the teaching-learning processes (hereafter: teaching), as a “function-concept”. This means that an initially empty and abstract idea of teaching is put in *function* of various variables: teacher, pupils, content, medium, action, context, and so forth. In other words, it is always characterized as being teaching of *something*, or/and to *someone from someone*, in certain *contexts*, through certain *actions*, and so on (Baldacci, 2013, p. 29).

Based on these observations, I consider the following “variables” (or better, dimensions) in the construction of my model: axiology, epistemology, teaching dimension, and learning dimension. I draw on these variables from the theory of didactic transposition, a concept firstly proposed by Verret (1975) that Chevallard (1985) took over and re-elaborate into a proper theory, which has been further developed by other authors. Generally, this theory provides both descriptive and normative frameworks to understand the processes by which the *savoirs savants*, that is, scholarly knowledge produced in an academic context, become *savoirs scolaires*, which can be further distinguished into *savoirs à enseigner*, *savoirs enseignés*, and, finally, *savoirs appris* by pupils. Taking cue from Rossi and Pezzimenti (2013), I recognize four dimensions in this process: 1) the epistemological dimension, which relates to the epistemological transformation of the scholarly *savoirs savants* into the *savoirs à enseigner* of curricula or textbooks; 2) the teaching dimension, that is, the various procedures, techniques, and tools through which the *savoirs à enseigner* are actually taught to pupils; 3) the learning dimension, that is, the various pupil-related factors (e.g., previous knowledge, expectations, motivation) that influence the way in which *savoirs enseignés* are interiorized as *savoirs appris*; and finally, 4) the axiological dimension.

In regard to this latter point, Develay (1995) observed that the process of remodeling the *savoirs savants* is not dictated simply by a neutral selection of contents and their transformation in teaching and learning objects, but also by value judgments (“*travail d’axiologisation*”, p. 26) concerning, for example, the relationships between pupils and the *savoirs*, pupils and society, or the *savoirs* and the overarching project for society. Develay also noted that a *savoir scolaire* corresponds not only to a *savoir savant*, but also to a set of activities, or social roles, collectively referred to as “social practices of reference” (p. 26). Allieu (1995), discussing the case of the subject of history, posited a link between these practices and the aforementioned *travail d’axiologisation*, such as in the case of social practices of memory aimed at recalling positively valued events or preventing negatively valued events from reoccurring. In other words, with the term “axiological dimension”, I refer to the reasons why a given society transposes a certain *savoir savant* in one way instead of another. Which social practice and discourse is it supposed to affect? Which values are implicated?

In my proposal, these four dimensions are mutually interrelated but do not have the same weight. The dimension of axiology refers to the realm of pedagogy in the sense of the overall formation of the individual as a part of society within the horizon of values, mindsets, and behaviors deemed desirable. By saying “deemed desirable” I highlight the political and utopian aspects of the pedagogical discourse (Biesta, 2015; Frabboni & Pinto Mineriva, 2018). In other words, the axiological dimension represents the starting point from which to set why and how a certain *savoir* is deemed worth teaching. We should also note an arbitrary aspect of the *axiological/educative* dimension because it ultimately points toward an ideal vision of society that depends on the choice of one or more *axioms*.

Moreover, the epistemological variable is likewise not axiologically neutral in the sense that, within a single discipline, axioms, paradigms, findings, and conclusions are not necessarily coherent nor homogenized. The study of religions is a case in point (Meylan, 2015; Schilbrack, 2018). Therefore, certain social practices of relevance may be favored, while others may be undermined and excluded based on the chosen premises.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> To provide a quick example, the deconstructionist trend of the study of religion/s automatically excludes a RE whose social practice concerns that kind of interreligious dialogue aimed at discovering that all religions are fundamentally referring to a single, common “Truth.”

We have already set some elements. For the epistemological dimension, we refer to the topic of Asian religions. For the axiological dimension, the pedagogical perspective of intercultural and citizenship education is chosen because, as will be shown throughout the present article, it fits well with the topic at hand and is a shared view among RE scholars. The other two dimensions of teaching and learning are somewhat more dependent on the previous ones.

Given the logical preeminence of the axiological dimension in influencing the whole subsequent process of didactic transposition, I start by presenting the model from it and then discuss the other ones following the logic of the process of didactic transposition outlined above.

I do not intend to present this model as a ready-to-use method nor as a sort of comprehensive “theory of teaching Asian religions.” I rather think of it as a sort of conceptual toolkit that highlights some pivotal aspects and knots, hence combining theoretical and practical insights.

### 3 The axiological dimension

#### 3.1 Theoretical discussion

Even if they may sound redundant, the starting points should be the principles of equality between religious, a-religious, and nonreligious positions, of public secular institutions, and of freedom both of and from religion. This has the epistemological consequence of adopting the perspectives of the study of religions as a field of study characterized by constant self-reflection and self-criticism in an attempt to reach the most impartial point of view possible.

At the same time, we must note that these principles, together with other pivotal contemporary principles such as human rights, democracy, and rule of law, are historically and geographically determined concepts. The two concepts of “religion” and “secular” were developed in Euro-American regions and have been universalized through colonization (Asad, 2003; Mandair & Dressler, 2011; Nongbri, 2013). In other words, we cannot achieve an absolutely value-free teaching in relation to religion. This absence of a universal vantage point resonates with the shift from a multicultural perspective to our chosen intercultural perspective.

Previously, cultures, especially national ones, were considered monolithic blocks to be managed by a superordinate framework (e.g., the ONU model based on human rights). Nowadays, there is a clearer perception that the rapid global interconnectedness between people, goods, information, and capital relentlessly produces exchanges between heterogeneous sociocultural groups. Consequently, it is more correct to apply a complex concept of society and culture. Groups, individuals, and their cultural productions and social organizations are no longer considered separate blocks but are better interpreted as “nodes” within combined flows of knowledge, symbols, materials, technologies, and people. Small- and large-scale cultural phenomena do not arise *ex vacuo* but are the result of shifts, transformations, adaptations, negotiations, and reworkings (CoE, 2018; Portera, 2013; UNESCO, 2013).

Barriers and boundaries, either physical or symbolic, as well as identity dynamics, are considered equally mobile and fluid over time but are no less effective in conditioning social, cultural, and political spheres. Interests and power inequalities of various kinds (political, economic, epistemological) may influence the direction of intercultural flows or constructions of boundaries and identities, which, in such a context of increased complexity, may easily lead to conflicts (Eriksen, 2001; Remotti, 1996). Global interconnectedness also brings about the issue of homogenization driven by hegemonic trends, such as the “McDonaldization” effect (Ritzer, 1993).

In such an increasingly interconnected, diverse, and contested intercultural world, it is pivotal to address the notion of negotiation among different horizons and degree of negotiability of one’s own position (Hardy & Hussain, 2017; Mansouri & Arber, 2017). Therefore, I agree with Frank and Bleisch and their idea of RE as fundamentally aimed at fostering cohabitation between individuals and groups with different horizons (Frank, 2016; Frank & Bleisch, 2017).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, as Giorda and Saggiaro (2011) suggested, RE should support pupils in making conscious decisions in relation to ethical, legal, political, and cultural debates concerning religions. Therefore, apart from reliable information, what is also needed is a second-order analytical-critical discourse about religious phenomena (Jensen, 2019), including their entanglements with other dimensions of society and their dynamics of self- and hetero-representation, of power, and of identity. Furthermore, the same approach should be translated into critical self-awareness, especially of those hidden assumptions concerning religion, which Alberts (2007) considered the emancipative aspect of RE.

<sup>2</sup> Therefore, I disagree with the idea that RE, even if nonconfessional, still has a role in shaping pupils’ own religious/existential views (see the discussion concerning “learning from religion” in English RE or “life-question pedagogy” in Swedish RE in Alberts, 2007). However, I do consider that this may be the expectation of pupils, see § 6.

### 3.2 Operative indications

To distill the above discussion into practical indications, I have taken direct inspiration from the *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (CoE, 2018). This work identifies 20 competences, or psychological resources (specific values, attitudes, skills, knowledge, and understanding), that are deemed necessary to positively cope with intercultural situations within a context of democracy. I will select and summarize some of them. In the next sections, I argue that these competences are well matched with the teaching of knowledge, perspectives, and methods of the study of religions, in particular Asian religions.

First, it is important to note that, as a competence, the *Framework* lists the adherence to specific values as a fundamental prerequisite for democratic coexistence among different cultures. These values are human dignity and human rights, cultural diversity, democracy, justice, fairness, equality, and the rule of law. We should note the unavoidable tension between the strong universality inherent in the notion of human rights and the particularity inherent in the notion of cultural diversity. A similar discourse applies to democracy as the axiologically proposed form of government. However, the explicit foregrounding of these values is not meant only to help interiorize them and refer to them in any teaching situation (especially when dealing with sensitive issues), but it also stresses that no teaching can be completely value free, and that it is a specific position bound to its historical and cultural context. In other words, the point is to avoid considering these values as metaphysical principles in the same manner as religious postulates, thus precluding any degree of negotiability. Also, in the RE context, we must necessarily add another value: the secularity of public institutions.

Other relevant competences are the following: “openness to cultural otherness” which is not mere experiencing of the “exotic,” but entails being receptive toward diversity, suspending judgment and questioning the “naturalness” of one’s own cultural characterization (CoE, 2018, pp. 41–42). “Tolerance of ambiguity” (CoE, 2018, p. 45) entails the recognition and acceptance of cultural complexities, contradictions, uncertainty, and the will to address them constructively. “Respect” means to judge something or someone to be of somewhat importance but not to minimize or ignore difference. It does not require agreement but is linked to the acknowledgment of different frames of references (e.g., the above-cited values) and their degree of negotiability (CoE, 2018, pp. 42–43). “Knowledge and critical understanding of the self” means to be critically aware of one’s own contingent historical position and cultural affiliations, which influence our perspective through preconceptions and cognitive and emotional biases (CoE, 2018, pp. 52–53). “Knowledge and critical understanding of the world (including [...] culture, cultures, religions, history [...])” means understanding that cultural groups are complex and internally contested, that they interact and change in time and space also in relation to economic and political factors, and that the dynamics of power and discrimination exist between and within groups. Interestingly enough, “religion” is treated by the *Framework* as a separate area from culture, and its key elements are texts, doctrines, beliefs, and experiences of individuals (CoE, 2018, p. 55). This runs the risk of essentializing and imposing an ethnocentric point of view (cf. next section), thus undermining some of the *Framework’s* 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 *Framework* as a whole. A critical understanding of history means being aware that interpretations and narratives of the past vary over time and across cultures, especially of those forces that shape the contemporary world. Power inequalities and ethnocentrism can shape these narratives. Key concepts such as democracy and citizenship (and in our case, religion and secularity) have developed in different ways in different cultures over time (CoE, 2018, pp. 53–56). Finally, competences of “civic mindedness” and “responsibility” entail making decisions and being accountable for them in front of various kinds of communities while considering the above-mentioned cultural complexities and the existence of different frames of reference outside one’s own, historical entanglements and power dynamics (CoE, 2018, pp. 43–44).

## 4 Epistemological dimension

### 4.1 Theoretical and historical discussion: The first two challenges

Here, I address those “lenses” (premises, concepts, terminology, methods, etc.) that I deem desirable for pupils to adopt and acquire when studying religions, especially Asian religions. Before this, however, we need to discuss some preliminary questions.

To start with, there is a lively epistemological debate within the study of religion because of the awareness of the modern, European and Christian-centric origins of the concept of “religion” and of the discipline itself (Fitzgerald, 2000; Masuzawa, 2005; Nongbri, 2013; Smith, 1998). There are two main orientations in the field (Schilbrack, 2018).

One is focused on critically examining the conditions, genealogies, and power-related motivations for this idea to evolve from a local Latin term into a worldwide naturalized idea (King, 2017a). The other still heuristically relies on the concept of religion as a theoretical tool, mindful of its historical and cultural baggage, and constantly rethinking it (Stausberg, 2009; Stausberg & Engler, 2016).

Although I do not intend to discard the latter approach, the topic of Asian religions works well with the former critical approach in that it poses three “challenges” to RE in Euro-American contexts. The first two are dealt with here in relation to the epistemological dimension, while the third one is discussed below in relation to the teaching and learning dimensions.

The first challenge concerns the Christian-Protestant influence still lingering in many commonsensical uses of religions. Very briefly, from the nineteenth century onwards, discourses on religion set the core characteristic of the genus of religion so that all the relative species were supposed to have these traits: 1) *universality* and *distinctiveness*: all societies have one or more “religions” separated by other spheres such as “politics” or “economics”; 2) *creedal emphasis*: all religions are essentially a set of beliefs expressing truth claims, toward which members are expected to have “faith in,” and the ritual expressions of which are of secondary importance; 3) *scripturalism*: these beliefs are inscribed in a closed, authoritative canon that has primarily cognitive value (instead of, e.g., ritual value); 4) *discreteness*: religions are discrete entities without any contamination between each other (King, 2011, p. 49; Stoddard & Martin, 2017)

Asian religions provide plenty of examples that challenge this paradigm. Not infrequently, lay practitioners in contemporary China and Japan address or practice more religious traditions, that is, Buddhism, Daoism, Shintoism, or local traditions (even Christianity), without any concern of exclusive belonging or incompatibility of beliefs. Instead, the differentiating factors are the modalities of practices (ritual, communal, cultivational, scriptural, immediate-practical), which nonetheless cut across different traditions (Chau, 2011; Kisala, 2006; LeFebvre, 2015; cf. also statistics in Roemer, 2012; Yang, 2018). Confucianism is a case in point when addressing the overlap of the ethical, political, philosophical, and religious spheres, which has caused many disputes about whether it was a religion or not (Sun, 2013). In Japan, the cases of Buddhism and Shintoism show the absence of discreteness between traditions. Not only has Buddhism historically incorporated the local *kami* deities of Japan both doctrinally and ritually, but Shintoism actually developed as a self-conscious tradition from the sixteenth century onwards through its interaction with Buddhism (Breen & Teeuwen, 2010; Teeuwen & Rambelli, 2003). The varied yet consistent array of phenomena classified as “tantrism” or “esotericism” are a widely shared Asian body of beliefs and practices, mostly related to Hinduism and Buddhism, which strongly emphasize ritual actions and the role of the body to manipulate the cosmos for soteriological, political, and mundane aims, thus challenging an inwards, mind-centered approach to religion (Orzech et al., 2011; White, 2000). Some may object that present-day religious phenomena are not so challenging to the commonsense notion of religion or, conversely, that the original form of traditions, such as Buddhism, was devoid of any “superstitions.” Historical and ethnographic evidence points to the contrary: early Buddhism featured beliefs and practices relative to “demons” or *genii loci* called *yakkha* (DeCaroli, 2004); similarly, to practice to receive mundane benefits (Jp. *genze riyaku*) is a cross-cutting feature of contemporary Japanese religiosity (Reader & Tanabe, 1998).

This is not to completely deny elements appealing to Euro-American tastes, such as the disenchanting figure of a sober Zen monk in meditation or the philosophical allure of certain Daoist or Buddhist texts. The point is that such elements have been forcibly emphasized by the impact of the modern and European idea of religion in Asian regions, which brings us to the second challenge.

This second challenge refers to the processes of hetero- and self-representations of Asian traditions subjected to colonial control or influence. One of the most critical factors in this process was the operation of interpreting, ranking and evaluating religions other than Christianity based on the above-mentioned paradigm (Cotter & Robertson, 2016b; Smith, 1998).

Concerning India, in their attempt to understand its religions, scholars, colonial administrators, and missionaries looked to Brahmins and Muslim law-doctors, that is, conservative religious specialists whose religious practice was closer to westerners’ preconceived idea of religion based on elite-written texts and of the separation between Islam and the “religion” of India. This came at the expense of lesser texts, ritual religious expressions, or mutual borrowings between Islamic and Hindū traditions. At the same time, modern ideas such as the universality of religion and of religious experience, the rejection of the ritual dimension, and the emphasis on creedal belief and rational interpretation of texts started spreading. In this way, the term and idea of “Hinduism” gradually developed and entered the public sphere (Bloch et al., 2010).

We see similar processes in nineteenth and early twentieth China and Japan: the term “religion” had to be translated with neologisms: *zongjiao* (Ch.) and *shūkyō* (Jp.), highlighting the idea of a teaching (*jiao*, *kyō*) belonging to a lineage or “sect” (*zong*, *shū*). In Republican and Communist China, this brought about the recognition of five religions (Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism) codified along a modern concept of religion, while all the other religious expressions (the so-called Chinese folk religion) have been (and in some ways still are) banned as superstitions (*mixin*) (Goossaert & Palmer, 2011; Tarocco, 2008). The same occurred in Japan, with *shūkyō* opposed to *meishin* (“superstitions”). Here, the idea of religion as a private matter concerned with morals and emotional or philosophical issues strongly influenced Buddhist schools, which reorganized themselves under the banner of *Shinbukkyō* (“New Buddhism”). Their agenda was to go beyond sectarian divisions and to emphasize common elements and articulate them in accordance with modern sensibility: rationalism, the rejection of ritualism, an emphasis on morality and inner experience, the convergence with science, and so on. The overall perspective was to contribute to the creation of a strong modern Japanese nation (Isomae, 2012; Josephson, 2012).

A pivotal role was played by the local religious élite, educated in modern European standards, sensitive, and perceptive toward these ideas about religion, especially in nationalistic terms. Reformers such as Vivekānanda (1863–1902), Dharmapāla (1864–1933), Shaku Sōen (1860–1919), Taixu (1890–1947), and Suzuki Daisetsu (1870–1966) (King, 1999; D. S. Lopez, 2008; Rigopoulos, 2019; Sharf, 1993; Snodgrass, 2003) were quite active in promoting their traditions to Western audiences, such as in the 1893 World Parliament of Religions, through two strategies of self-orientalism. On the one hand, Eastern traditions were represented as the “other” in terms of nonrationality, of being beyond words and ungraspable by the materialistic mind of the Westerner. On the other hand, they flipped over the Western critique of backwardness. They emphasized the importance of religious experience being deepened by the single individual through meditation, highlighting the universality of such experiential dimension and rationalistic interpretation of (carefully cherry-picked) texts. This resonated positively with both the Christian prototype of religion, modern subjectivity, and modern ideal of self-realization. All of this appealed not only to the romantic, orientalist idea of Asia as the cradle of a universal “spirituality,” but also to more Enlightenment-oriented thinkers who saw in, for example, Buddhism a new atheist, rational religion to replace Christianity with. These historical processes are the roots of the nowadays widespread fascination and knowledge about a certain image of Asian religions: that of a freer spirituality (opposed to religion), sometimes more “rational” than its Christian or monotheistic counterparts, and sometimes more “irrational” and “holistic.” In both cases, their appeal often lies in them being imagined as alternatives to the perceived mainstream of Euro-American religions (Altglas, 2014; McMahan, 2008; Palmer & Siegler, 2017).

## 4.2 Operative indications

Given the inadequacy of a Eurocentric idea of religion and the historical influence of this idea over Asian religions, which fundamental concepts, terms, and perspectives should we adopt (and transmit) when teaching these religions to pupils?

Meylan (2015) argued that the “matrice disciplinaire déconstructionniste”, in its preeminent focus to unveil the influence of Protestantism, paradoxically remains too Christian-centric. Jensen (2008, 2019) proposed that RE should adopt both the “deconstructionist” and “constructionist” approaches, including recent developments of the latter, such as evolutionary or cognitive sciences-based ones, while still being mindful that “religion” is merely a tool of the scholar and that “religions” are merely representations and explanations made by scholars and other stakeholders on existent social facts. Alberts (2007) proposed a concept of religion to be delineated with a “dynamic polycentrism of aspects” (p. 373) to avoid not only the question of the “essence” of religion, but also to dismiss the need for a substantialist criterion, for example, “transcendence,” to blur the distinction between religions and phenomena such as civic religions, scientism, humanism, and so on. Frank instead individuated two substantialist criteria: a collective basis of validity and reference to a transcendent dimension. However, gray areas are still to be expected, and negative or restricted positions such as atheism or humanism are elements to be considered.

Against this background, my proposal takes the form of a definition of religion. It is not meant to be added to the many scholarly definitions, but it is proposed as a kind of mnemonic device of reference for teachers to synthesize various key theoretical points in a single look. I will offer the definition and then elaborate on its implications:

The term “religion” refers to a historically constructed notion. However, it is often considered an unproblematic and universal phenomenon due to the modern pretension of universality in Euro-American cultures. Instead, it has a distinct genealogy and its meanings and uses have changed throughout history and across places.

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 types of cultural resources, which, interacting with human biological make-up and referring to superempirical realities, support cognitively, emotionally, and bodily these communities and individuals in “making homes,” in “crossing” and “creating boundaries.”

The first paragraph refers to the deconstructive strand in the study of religions, which warns against uncritically applying a concept with specific historical and cultural origins because it may be misleading if applied, for example, to East Asian religions. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge its global spread, as we have seen in the case of modern development of East Asian religions and their representations. This connects with the above-mentioned competences of “knowledge and critical understanding of the self”, (CoE, 2018, p. 52) and “knowledge and critical understanding of the world (including [...] culture, cultures, religions, history [...])” (CoE, 2018, p. 55). We are dealing with our non-neutral position regarding both our concept of religion and our image of Asian religions, which are the results of complex yet defined historical, cultural, and political processes.

The second paragraph proposes the criteria by which certain phenomena can be *stipulatively* addressed as “religious.” The criteria are both substantial and functional. The former refers to superempirical realities (Schilbrack, 2013), that is, nonempirical realities treated as existing independently from empirical sources.<sup>3</sup> The latter are fairly broad functional criteria, largely drawn from Tweed (2006) and Company (2003). The rationale is to highlight the many aspects that may be used as analytical elements, which also include the biological make-up, that is, the acknowledgment of the role of the biological substratum as indicated by the recent cognitive sciences of religion (Geertz, 2016), which is then connected to the importance of the religious role of the body (physical and metaphorical) in Asian religions, and that also helps in curbing the Protestant focus on the cognitive dimension. Wordings such as “various types of cultural resources”, “create”, “change”, “select” and so forth hint at the above-mentioned observations about the creative use of elements from multiple religious traditions. Tweed’s metaphors of “making home” and “crossing boundaries”<sup>4</sup> are simple yet flexible enough to accommodate various types of phenomena, including those overlooked by a Protestant paradigm. “Making home” can unproblematically refer to the religious quest for everyday mundane benefits in contemporary Japanese religiosity, as well as to the socio-cosmo-political overlaps we find in Confucianism or in the idea of *Dharma* in Hindū traditions. “Crossing boundaries” can unproblematically refer to the creative and syncretic aspects of many Asian religious phenomena, as well as those many examples of tantric and ascetic religiosity aimed at gaining superior (i.e., beyond ordinary borders) knowledge, powers, or even physical condition. Tweed’s proposal has been criticized (Reader, 2007) for being so broad that it is unhelpful in explaining religions on well-defined grounds. However, I would argue that pupils are not expected to make new breakthroughs in the discipline but to fictionally re-enact with the largest possible breadth the experience of researchers (Martini, 2012).

The complexity of all the elements just discussed and emphasis on the heuristic, multilayered, and provisional use of the concept of “religion” connects to the above-mentioned competence of “tolerance of ambiguity” (CoE 2018, p. 45). The use of metaphors that embrace also those phenomena outside the Protestant paradigm, together with the already mentioned awareness of our own cultural characterizations and the need to step out of them, can contribute to the competence of “openness to cultural otherness” (CoE 2018, p. 41).

My personal addition to Tweed’s metaphors is “creating boundaries” and refers to the fact 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, 2001, p. 134). This is not limited to social phenomena in which groups are distinguished or separated on religious grounds, but also includes the ways in which the very concept of religion has been used as a universal yardstick to classify people and cultures, as we saw when it was applied to Asian traditions.

<sup>3</sup> For example, if people treat some nonempirical realities, such as justice or the idea of nation, as the given entities independent of human creation, then we may speak of religion (in this case, a sort of civil religion).

<sup>4</sup> Space prevents a detailed discussion of this, but basically, “making home” refers to the functions of situating the religious practitioners in space and time, starting from their individual bodies (by gendering them, by distinguishing between, e.g., impermanent bodies and permanent souls, etc.) up to the whole cosmologies. In between, there are religious framings of the household, society, and homeland. “Crossing boundaries” indicates those movements across terrestrial borders (e.g., missionary expansion, pilgrimages), social borders (e.g., rites of passage), corporeal limits (e.g., asceticism), and cosmic limits (e.g., imaging afterlife) (Tweed, 2006).



## 5 Teaching dimension

### 5.1 Theoretical context

In this section, we draw nearer the actual teachers' activity of planning and implementing their work in class, where knowledge *to be taught* becomes knowledge *actually taught*.

As a first step I take inspiration from Chevallard's (1985) notions of "chronogenesis" and "topogenesis". The former refers to the creation of a linear teaching plan by the teacher who "*sait avant*" (p.71) and thus knows the right order of the contents to be taught in order to promote learning, based on the right distance between old and new information. For our discussion this brings us to the issue of *narratives*. That is, we should reflect, in light of the above discussion, on which sequence of information should be presented to pupils to promote which kind of learning. For example, should we adopt a narrative about Buddhism from the birth of Gautama up to the contemporary times, or, following the bold proposal of Nye (2019), should East Asian religions be engaged from the postcolonial present backwards, to debunk the illusion of historical homogeneity, stress change, and highlight the impact of western modernity? In less extreme terms, how much time should be devoted to the life and teachings of Gautama, given their lesser role in Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions?

Chevallard's "topogenesis" refers to the fact that the teacher not only "*sait avant*" or "*sait plus*" (p. 71), but also "*sait autrement*" (p. 74). That is, differently from the pupils, s/he has a mastery of all different dimensions and approaches of a given body of knowledge, which logically cannot all be expected to become the learning outcome of the pupil. Therefore, the "topogenesis" of the objects of teaching/learning is the result of a negotiation between the level of the pupil and that of the teacher, with a strong control of the latter on this operation. For our discussion this brings us to the issue of *representations*. That is, we should reflect, in light of the above discussion, on which dimension is highlighted, or which we want to be highlighted, in our presentation of contents. For example, in presenting Buddhism, should we focus on those aspects which pupils may expect to belong to Buddhism, and stress the "homogeneity" of this religion, or should we stress inner heterogeneity and aspects usually not associated with Buddhism (e.g., political power, this-worldly concerns)? Still further, should we flip completely the usual epistemological perspective and explore the historical reasons why we came to think of Buddhism as a single "thing"?

To answer these questions, we need a second step, that is, the individuation of learning objectives. A fundamental distinction is that between general and specific objectives. The former refer to the long-term acquisition of mindsets that are typical of the discipline of reference (in our case, the study of religions developed from research on East Asian religions). The latter are more specifically concerned with single competences or pieces of knowledge, and their sum should yield an approximation of general objectives (Martini, 2012). A taxonomy of objectives is to be set, organizing them in relation to different competences to be gained. A famous example is Bloom's taxonomy, revised by his colleagues (Anderson et al., 2001), which hierarchically arranges six cognitive process dimensions from the most basic to the more complex: *remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate and create*.

A final topic to be considered is teaching methodologies, which vary greatly according to the fundamental didactic approach and parameters taken into consideration. For example, cognitivism-inspired didactic procedures provide pupils with the right arrangements of content and a system of corrective and reinforcing feedback. A constructivist approach will place pupils within an environment equipped with adequate resources and have them work autonomously and cooperatively while the teacher acts as a facilitator. Among recurring parameters, there is control. The traditional frontal lesson is highly manageable but neglects the activation and involvement of pupils. By sharing more control with pupils, we may have a participatory lesson that features only a partial planning of contents and increases the parameter of interaction. A problem-based methodology features most of the control on the side of the pupils. In brief, by identifying and specifying the fundamental approaches and parameters, we may range from simple discussions in class to more elaborate project-work (Bonaiuti et al., 2017).

### 5.2 Additional insights: The third challenge

At this point, I would like to add further insights relevant to the dimensions of teaching and learning by discussing a third challenge related to Asian religions in the RE context.

Let us recall that Asian reformers actively introjected certain features of modern religiosity (individualism, rationalism, nationalism, antiritualism, etc.). These new forms of Asian religions, usually termed by scholars as Neo-Hinduism or Buddhist Modernism, became objects of interest for numerous postwar movements, such as 1960s counter-cultures, which saw in these religions an exotic alternative to the religious and cultural mainstream.

Here a further development took place: the rational and national/institutional elements were lessened, while the individualism and psychologism were even more celebrated as a mean to obtain a higher level of consciousness and freedom from the social, cultural, and mental constraints of American bourgeois society. Hence, we have the idealization of the image of the eccentric Zen or Daoist monk, free from ordinary societal ties and roaming in search of enlightenment, as found in literary works such as Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* (1958) (Campbell, 1987).

In the background, there is also the growing salience and appeal of "spirituality," that is, a peculiar mode of religiosity focused on the subjectivity of the individual practitioner who refuses to abide by institutional doctrines and the rites of established religions, and who instead creatively draws from many traditions to explore and enrich the "inner self," which is considered the real locus of the sacred as opposed to an external, transcendental God (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Streib & Klein, 2016).

Gauthier (2020) offered a wide-ranging framework for interpreting these changes. He argued that, from the nineteenth century onward, a shift can be seen in the religious landscape first in Euro-American regions and then in most parts of the world. Very briefly, modern religiosity was modeled after what Gauthier called the "Nation-State Regime" and it was expected to be "rationalised, institutionalised, scripturalised, dogmatic, belief-centred, differentiated, (mono)theistic, hierarchical, centralised, ideological, homogenised, institutionalised, territorial, and nation-bound" (2020, p. 5). From the end of the Second World War onwards, another regime, that of the "Global-Market" became increasingly prominent. Its structuring principles are neoliberalism and consumerism, which influence religions through the two imperatives of utilitarian individualism and expressive individualism. The former empathizes values such as self-realization, mobility, cost-effectiveness ratio, constant improvement, overcoming obstacles, and so forth. The latter fuels a constant need for ideas, imaginary, and objects to continuously recreate and bestow "authenticity" to one's own identity by structuring one's life into "unique" lifestyles. Also, because neoliberalism and consumerism tend to spread in all social spheres, religions now start to "spill out" into formerly separated spheres, such as health, labor, wellness, and sports.

Gauthier's frame is quite useful regarding the contemporary development of Asian religions in Euro-American regions. Indeed, Altglas argued that Western practitioners of modern Hindū traditions are not simply drawn to them because of mere exoticism but because they saw in them functional answers to those imperatives induced by neoliberalism and consumerism. For example, the imperative of being "positive," of managing stress and anxiety, and of striving for constant sensations of self-realization and fulfillment. Palmer and Sieger observed how popular Western interpretations of Daoism offer remedies against social atomization. However, ideas of interconnectedness with the whole cosmos still maintain a strong individualist component because they require no adhesion to a specific dogma or institutional membership. Furthermore, Daoist ideas and practices concerning gymnastics, dietary provisions, meditation, and even techniques to enhance sexual activity, when abstracted from their institutional contexts, fit well the demand for emotional peak experiences, for a quest of wellness, and a search for self-authentication. *Mindfulness-based stress reduction therapy* shows how certain Buddhist meditative practices have been abstracted and rationalized into a supposedly nonreligious protocol for psychological health aimed at coping with the pressure of contemporary neoliberal competitive society (Braun, 2017). Squarcini and Nencini (2020) define as "ablated Hinduism" all those ideas, practices, and objects abstracted from their original contexts and creatively re-elaborated and commodified as tools for psycho-physical wellness and the construction of one's own lifestyles. Carrette and King (2005) lamented the way many ideas and practices of Asian traditions have been rearticulated to enchant and justify practices of consumerism or business management practices.

This freedom of bricolage and reinterpretation is further facilitated by the internet, which allows new forms of identity, community, and, most importantly, eschewing traditional authority control over new religious ideas and practices. A case in point is the creation of online communities of non-Japanese Shintō practitioners, which further appear to be inspired by other media, such as Miyazaki's animation films (Baffelli & Ugoretz, 2021; Rots, 2015).

All these elements, in addition to those discussed in the second challenge, are extremely relevant to our discussion of RE. Indeed, present-day young people are not only expected to be exposed to various modernized versions of East Asian religions, but especially those labeled as Generation Z (Dimock, 2019) are particularly sensitive to the imperatives of utilitarian and expressive individualism. On the one hand, if "One of the most important tasks of adolescents concerns the establishment of an identity" (Roberts, 2007, p. 85), then key notions of consumerism such as "lifestyle" are particularly influential (Bennett, 2015). On the other hand, the flexibility of the labor market and rise of new role models (such as social media influencers) force young people to create an "enterprising self" and build an "aesthetics of existence" aimed at defining one's personal identity as unique, authentic, creative, and free (Cuzzocrea & Benasso, 2020; Stokes et al., 2015). Finally, present-day adolescents are truly digital natives (Introini & Pasqualini, 2018).

In fact, in my recent empirical research (Lapis, 2023), I have found that Italian adolescents are fascinated by Asian traditions, especially when they interpret them as “spiritual” resources that may help them better express their inner self and personality. This perception is further reinforced through a contrast with the monotheistic religions perceived as “oppressive”. Asian religions are considered in tune with modern, rational worldviews focused on this-worldly matters, with the addition of providing a sort of re-enchantment in regard to such matters, which often translates into ideas of spiritual communion with the natural environment, with ecological implications. Many psychological benefits are expected from these religions, from a generic “self-improvement,” to relief from stress or anxiety, to improved performance such as studying in school. Instead of looking for institutional representatives, adolescents tend to gain information from the internet, especially if conveyed in catchy multimedia ways through social media. In summary, the fact that Asian traditions are often represented in modalities that may resonate with the personal issues of adolescents is a factor to be duly considered.

### 5.3 Teaching dimension: operative indications

Alberts (2007) highlighted the need to represent complexity: majority–minority relationships, dynamics of change, fuzzy borders between traditions, power relations, small and great narratives within the tradition, and the processes of self- and hetero-representations within Orientalism and Occidentalism. Alberts has been particularly critical of the idea of “world religions” (Alberts, 2017; Cotter & Robertson, 2016a). Saggiaro and Giorda (2011) emphasized the role of historical dynamics. For Frank, the focus should instead be on what people do with religions. This means that learning about religious systems of symbols (texts, doctrines, etc.) is relevant only if connected with those aspects and dimensions of religion that children and adolescents encounter in their everyday lives (on the street, in newspapers, on the internet, in literature, in film, and in advertising) instead of referring directly to the Bible or Qur’an (Frank, 2013; 2016).

My proposal starts by recommending two preliminary operations. First, according to the axiological principle of freedom both of and from religion (§ 3.1) and our epistemological stance (§ 4.2), it should be made explicit to pupils that religions will be treated as human phenomena, without asking whether they have metaphysical grounding (methodological agnosticism). Second, pupils should be made aware that the narratives and representations offered are “maps” and, therefore, not the “territory” itself.<sup>5</sup> Similar to various kinds of maps (physical, political, roadmaps, etc.), the purposes of the various narratives and representations should be made explicit. Consistent with our epistemological stance, narratives and representations should have two main aims: a “deconstructive” and “constructive” one.

In other words, RE should transmit to pupil two complementary types of tools and information. Concerning the first type, related to the deconstructive aims, it should address the topics and problems touched in relation to the first two challenges (§ 4.1). That is, pupils should be engaged with tasks and contents that help them debunking a stereotyped and Christian-centric concept of religion and help them detect the role of this concept in the modern evolution, diffusion, and “Westernization” of Asian religions. Jensen argued that one of the prominent tasks of RE is “to deconstruct dominant ‘folk categories,’ dominant, normative, stereotypical ways of thinking about religion” (Jensen, 2020, p. 196), and we have seen how certain modernized traits of Asian religions are most likely to be encountered in the everyday lives of pupils. This also gives us a remarkable opportunity to build narrations and representations addressing topics near the experience of pupils. One example would be the – admittedly, bold and challenging – Nyle (2019)’s proposal of backwards narratives cited above.

From the axiological/pedagogical perspective, this “deconstructive” aspect is linked to the above-mentioned competences of “knowledge and critical understanding of the world (including [...] culture, cultures, religions, history [...])” (CoE, 2018, p. 55) and “knowledge and critical understanding of the self” (CoE, 2018, p. 52) because it is functional to show not only the limits of a euro-centric position, but also the historical reasons why it is difficult to question it, because even what we expect to be “other,” that is, Asian religions, are instead thoroughly “Westernized.” It also adds complexity to the picture, thus linking to the competence of “tolerance of ambiguity” (CoE, 2018, p. 45). Finally, by showing multiple aspects exceeding the Christian paradigm, it fosters “openness to cultural otherness” (CoE, 2018, p. 41).

However, merely introducing pupils to misunderstandings and their roots is not enough. In order to make intercultural judgments and decisions, future citizens must be able to picture other cultures and religions in the most comprehensive way possible. This is relevant to the competences of “civic mindedness” and “responsibility”, (CoE, 2018, pp. 42–43) and concurs as well to nurture the competences of and “knowledge and critical understanding of the world (including [...] culture, cultures, religions, history [...])” (CoE, 2018, p. 55) and “openness to cultural otherness” (CoE, 2018, p. 41).

<sup>5</sup> I refer to Alfred Korzybski’s (1879–1950) famous dictum, then resumed by Smith (1978).

We touch here the second type of tools and information we want to transmit to pupils. These “constructive” narratives and representations should function as maps for pupils to orientate themselves both historically and spatially within the landscape of what are called “religion” or “religions”. For this kind of “maps” it is useful to start from Jackson’s idea (1997) of the dialectical interplay between the individual practitioner, the tradition at large, and the various membership groups in between. However, the dimension of historical change, the possibility for individuals to partake in multiple traditions, and the dynamics of influence and borrowings between traditions must also be taken into account. Frank recommended not forgetting the fuzzy borders between religions and other spheres of society (2013). I include those unexpected aspects (consumerism, health) that are steadily being re-encharmed, as we saw in the third challenge (§ 5.2).

Although I agree in principle with Frank’s proposal to avoid doctrine-focused accounts of religions, which tend to represent religions as coherent and autonomous systems, from a practical point of view, “large-scale maps” of Asian religions should nonetheless be provided for three reasons: 1) to provide heuristic pointers on a topic probably unknown to many; 2) to counter monolithic orientalist interpretations by 3) also emphasizing doctrinal changes in history. One recommendation in these large-scale narratives is to avoid an excessive focus on the origins (the historical Buddha, the *Veda*, or the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*) in order to avoid treating them as if they encapsulate the supposed “essence” of that tradition, thus risking the subsequent historical changes to be considered as secondary aspects. Similarly, we should avoid treating the modern and contemporary developments cited in the second and third challenge, including the commodified forms, as “inauthentic” or “corrupted,” but we should put them in a perspective of global historical dynamics that directly addresses our own cultural and historical self-awareness, thus responding to the competences of critical understanding of the world and self. Finally, dealing with multiple types of complex ways of representing and narrating religions and culture further fosters the competence of “tolerance of ambiguity” (CoE, 2018, p. 45).

Another indication for the creation of narratives and representations is that they should be construed with the perspective of providing what Martini (2012, pp. 52-53) called “foundational nuclei”. This term indicates the simultaneous occurrence of many essential elements (concepts, methods, terms, and topics) that express as comprehensively as possible the characteristics of a discipline. In other words, deconstructive and constructive “maps” should be designed to make pupils re-enact the *forma mentis* of the deconstructive and constructive approaches of the study of religion.

Such narratives and representations are content not to be limited to frontal lessons. Pupils can “discover” or even “recreate” them through various didactic methods and adequate preparation of context and resources. Because the relevance of Asian religions is also linked to the foregrounding of one’s biased views, the active involvement of pupils’ starting knowledge is a logical and effective choice. No teaching methods are inadequate in theory. However, from a pragmatic point of view, the stratified history of orientalist and self-orientalist representations and the globalized presence of certain interpretations, especially those close to the everyday experience of pupils, may negatively affect free exploratory activities, for example, research through internet browsing or even by reading seemingly respectful publications<sup>6</sup>, if done without any guidance. This also leads us to the importance of carefully selecting, presenting, or even creating adequate resources.

Finally, narratives and representations must be conducive to the learning objectives, and are crucial control parameters to ensure the effectiveness of the teaching activities. My proposal of general, long-term objectives synthesizes the discussion so far and takes further insights from Frank’s model of competences (2016, pp. 25–30) and from the revised version of Bloom’s taxonomy proposed by Anderson et al. (2001). This taxonomy features increasingly abstract forms of knowledge: *factual*, *conceptual*, *procedural*, and *meta-cognitive knowledge* that pupils are expected to master through steps of increasing complexity: *remember*, *understand*, *apply*, *analyze*, *evaluate*, and *create*.

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<sup>6</sup> Renowned scholar of Buddhism Bernard Faure affirmed that the notion that “Buddhism is a philosophy, not a religion” is “undoubtedly the most widespread idea relating to Buddhism, even among academics” (2009, p. 27).

### Factual Knowledge

- “Maps” of religious traditions, featuring the three layers (traditions at large, membership group, and the individual<sup>7</sup>).
- “Maps” of self- and hetero-representations of religions and their historical entanglements.
- “Maps” of the interrelationship between the various layers, both within and between religions.
- Variety and complexity of aspects: oral, written, visual, material, and multimedia sources, dynamics of change, fuzzy borders between traditions, power relations, and mutual embedment with other spheres of society, such as politics, economy, and so on.
- Technical terms of religious traditions.
- Technical terms of the study of religions.

### Conceptual Knowledge

- Theoretical concepts of the different approaches to the study of religion(s).
- Concepts of Orientalism and Occidentalism.
- Conceptual understanding of cultural and intercultural complexities and dynamics: cultures as a pool of resources of individual identity; cultural groups as internally contested, mutually influencing and changing in time and space. Dynamics of power and global role of hegemonic discourses (e.g., neoliberalism).

### Procedural Knowledge

- Baseline research methods: developing questions suitable for objects or searching for objects suitable for the posed questions.
- Competences of description, comparison, explanation, interpretation, classification, and contextualization.<sup>8</sup>
- Preparation, communication, and mediating scholarly findings according to the type of addressees.

### Meta-cognitive 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 situations (e.g., of conflict).
- Critical understanding of one’s own cultural position. In particular, being able to deconstruct and defamiliarize oneself with dominant “folk categories” and dominant, normative, stereotypical ways of thinking about religion.

## 6 Learning dimension

### 6.1 Theoretical discussion

D’Amore and Frabboni (2005) discussed two concepts highly relevant to the process of learning. The first is the idea of a “didactic contract”. Among other things, it refers to the implicit expectations of the pupils concerning school in general or a subject in particular, developed out of their own personal experience (cf. also Nigris, 2013). In other words, it is worth considering which kind of pre-comprehension and attitude pupils may have already developed in relation to RE and East Asian religions. The second concept is that of the “models” and the creation thereof by the pupils. A model is a stratification of mental images that, upon several inputs, became so elaborated and strong as to resist further updates, thus subsuming any new inputs. This is linked to Brousseau’s notion of epistemological obstacles (2002). These are pieces of knowledge that have been useful in certain moments of the epistemological evolution of a discipline but that are of no use, or even detrimental, when conceptualizing more advanced information. An example in the study of religion is the notion of a universal “sacred” typical of the past phenomenological phase. Brousseau warned about the likelihood that pupils will probably face hindrances similar to those encountered in the historical evolution of the discipline.

<sup>7</sup> N.B.: in this case, the “individual” is to be considered capable to draw from, or belong to, different religious traditions at the same time.

<sup>8</sup> Space prevents discussion of these points, but refer to Alberts (2007, pp. 43–6) for further details.

These observations are even more relevant if we observe that a “special” character has generally been attributed to RE, that is, a strong connection to the personal dimension of pupils. Indeed, it is highly probable that pupils already have a well-defined and very diversified idea not only of what religion is, but also what it *ought* to be. As a matter of fact, many supposedly a-confessional RE theories and practices felt compelled to deal with the personal dimension of pupils and proposed ideas such as “learning from religion” (England), “life questions pedagogy” (Sweden) (Alberts, 2007), or presenting traits of what Frank and Bochinger (2008) called “Life-world related RE”. Although the study of religion approach to RE methodologically eschews matters pertaining to the religious or existential issues of pupils, it has been observed (Durish Gauthier, 2015; Jensen, 2008; Meylan 2015; Saggiaro & Giorda, 2011) that these cannot be completely avoided.

I contend that the topic of Asian religions is particularly sensitive to these problems. We have seen how these traditions have been increasingly modernized, intellectualized, psychologized, and easily co-opted by contemporary globalized trends of expressive and utilitarian individualism in a way that may strongly resonate with adolescents’ identity formation needs (§ 4.1, 5.2).

In other words, we may not be wrong to expect a number of pupils with a specific and already consolidated model of Asian religions in their minds and an expectation of deepening their knowledge for personal needs. This poses the issue of how to cope with this epistemological obstacle without dismissing pupils’ expectations too hastily. This would be detrimental for their motivation because they would not see their own personal experience acknowledged outside the school context. Second, we would miss the opportunity to stimulate the pivotal meta-cognitive function of reconfiguration of previous knowledge in relation to new inputs (Nigris, 2013).

## 6.2 Operative indications

As a useful first step, I would recommend devoting some time to explicitly explaining and discussing the “didactic contract” that pupils may have in mind, even unconsciously. First, it should be clarified that RE is not an intellectual venue in which religious traditions are evaluated and ranked based on rational, ethical, or whatever grounds. I do not intend with this that evaluative judgment cannot be made at all, but only with the following conditions: to explicitly foreground the underlying value framework we are referring to (cf. § 3.2) and to limit the judgment to specific empirical cases, not to entire traditions or to abstract issues (e.g., “the value of meditation”). Second, RE should be presented not as the real “Truth” about all the various religions but as knowledge that permits pupils to interpret and respond to these phenomena in the most neutral way possible. Similarly, RE should not be considered in a sort of competition with insiders’ interpretations over the issue of superempirical realities. However, the possibility of tensions on empirical grounds must also be acknowledged (Pye, 2013).

However, even these strategies cannot prevent, for example, a pupil from having expectations to learn about Buddhism or Daoism as coherent systems of thought and ethics from which to gain existential or philosophical guidance. Should this interest be completely dismissed, thereby increasing the risk of alienating the pupil?

As a rule of the thumb, I would not recommend that teachers proactively engage with this kind of exploration, but in the case of explicit requests from pupils and from the perspective of a balanced treatment of the topic of Asian religions, there is no reason to overlook aspects that can also be of philosophical or ethical interest. The point is to make explicit the shift in epistemological perspective: we are no longer asking “How can we make sense of these phenomena that historically have been defined as religions?” Instead, we are asking, “What can we learn of relevant to our present situation from these phenomena?”. That is, we abstract specific elements from their historical and cultural contexts and put them into a different one.

Moreover, tackling these kinds of questions may still give us the chance to further reaffirm our axiological and epistemological frames. If pupils are drawn to supposedly “Eastern” ways of thoughts (relationism, corporeity, intuition, holism, etc.) to counter supposedly modern “Western” modes (substantialism, intellectualism, rationalism, atomism, etc.), the key point is to show that both kinds of mentality can be found either in the “West” and “East,” the difference being which modality is foregrounded in accordance with cultural and historical contexts. This reaffirms the awareness of the complexity of cultures and of how clear-cut determinations are misleading. Kasulis’s work (2002) explored this issue, showing how, in the everyday life of American people, we can find patterns of thoughts analogous to Japanese ones. Looking at our common experience from this kind of perspective is also akin to Giorda’s recommendation of “dealing with Christianity in the same way as we would deal with other religions” (Giorda, 2012, p. 112), for example, addressing the Catholic cult of saints as a sort of polytheism.

It may well be the case that some pupils are particularly drawn to certain modern versions of Asian religions because they present well-ingrained contemporary values and ideas (individualism, self-expression, self-fulfillment, etc.)

while “wrapping” them in an exotic package. This can be a chance to enhance the competence of a “critical understanding of the self” (CoE 2018, p. 45) and of the historical reasons why native ideas are strategically projected onto the “Other.” However, exploring the nexus between Westernization, consumerism, and Asian religions may also trigger conflictual feelings because pupils may think they are “culturally appropriating” these traditions or that they are drawn to inauthentic and “white-washed” versions of them, especially if we consider the nowadays relevance of the so-called “identity politics”.<sup>9</sup> Although exposing historical and cultural hegemony dynamics is an important part of our RE proposal, we should be vigilant not to engender new essentialist approaches by letting students divide Asian religions into “authentic” and “inauthentic” versions. Instead, our axiological and epistemological frames urge us to embrace the full complexity of the contemporary religious landscape, both in its globalized, centripetal tendencies and particular and local expressions.

It means showing how religious phenomena constantly change and evolve into different paths through their inextricable ties with other spheres of human actions and how a modern, Protestantized idea of religion considers only one part of the multidimensional aspect of religion. From an intercultural perspective, this approach sensitizes toward the dynamic aspect of culture as a fundamentally constant flux of borrowings and influences but without permanent essence. At the same time, it also shows the role of power- and identity-related dynamics in shaping these changes, for example, the colonial dissemination of modern ideas and needs of virtually any religious group or subgroups to claim their authenticity and adherence to the ahistorical, original message of their tradition.

For example, the possible conflictual feelings of a pupil fascinated by Buddhism who discovers its less “spiritual” aspects, such as the quest for worldly benefits in Japan, or discovers the consumerist dimension of meditation in the West, can turn into an effective learning occasion. First, her/his experience is acknowledged as relevant and meaningful. Second, it can be an exercise consisting of accepting the many and contradictory aspects within a phenomenon and explaining them based on historical and cultural contexts. Third, it can be an opportunity for self-critical analysis to discover on which assumptions, and upon which explicit or implicit values, these conflictual feelings arise, and gauge one’s own degree of agreement with them by reflecting on one’s own value framework, which is further linked to one’s construction of identity during adolescence. Being aware of one’s own values and their degree of negotiability is also a step toward the construction of a global civic mindedness and responsible, self-aware decision-making.

## 7 Conclusion

The present article has proposed a model for teaching and learning religions from the perspective of the challenges presented by Asian religions. The rationale is that, because this topic has been functional to the critical rethinking of the study of religions, a similar result may also be expected for RE. I employed a “soft” conception of model as a simplified representation of various theoretical reflections, practical implementations, and their functional interrelationships. This model features four interrelated aspects: axiology, epistemology, teaching, and learning.

Axiology means the choice of the fundamental educational perspective. Here, I adopted an intercultural educational stance, in the sense that RE should be fostering a better coexistence in a situation characterized by global interconnectedness. The idea of “cultures” as monolithic blocks is considered misleading because individuals partake in different cultural pools, and social groups are internally diverse. At the same time, the role of power-related dynamics in shaping cultural change and identity formation is acknowledged. It has been argued that such a perspective fits well with the study of religions, especially Asian ones. Competences such as “critical knowledge of the self” (CoE 2018, p. 45) or “openness to cultural otherness” (CoE 2018, p. 41) are set as long-term educational objectives of this model.

Epistemology refers to the way in which we expect pupils to study religion. Consistent with the axiological dimension, the positionality of the model is highlighted, and “religion” is critically acknowledged as a historical and cultural-bound concept. At the same time, the heuristic value of this concept as a theoretical tool is acknowledged, and a wide-ranging definition is proposed. The need for a critical and wide-ranging heuristic approach to religion is justified by two challenges posed by Asian religions: the inadequacy of a Christian-centric concept of religion and influence of this concept in the modern developments of Asian religions. It has been argued that both a genealogical-critical and an analytical-descriptive approach can be applied and that they respond to the intercultural competences set in the axiological dimension.

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<sup>9</sup> On the influence of contemporary discourses about “cultural appropriation” and “identity politics” in relation to the development and the study of Buddhism in America and Europe, cf. Borup (2020).

The teaching dimension refers to the nature of the contents selected for the pupils, to the teaching strategies, and to the learning objectives chosen. In this regard, a third challenge has been discussed, namely, the huge influence of consumerism and neoliberal values in many of the contemporary developments and representations of East Asian religions worldwide. In connection to the second challenge, moreover, it has been argued that pupils are not only expected to be already somewhat accustomed to these versions of Asian religions, but are also likely to find them personally appealing because they respond to present-day adolescents' needs, which are influenced by consumerism and neoliberalism as well. Based on that, narratives and representations of religions should be offered to pupils as maps with both "deconstructive" and "constructive" aims. The former can fruitfully exploit the cultural proximity of certain modern versions of Asian religions. The latter should consider the complexities within and between religious traditions and avoid posing issues such as "authentic old traditions versus inauthentic modern developments." Given the cultural proximity of certain modern versions of Asian religions, careful guidance and selection of resources are recommended when assigning pupils tasks of active learning. Finally, a scheme of general learning objectives was proposed.

The learning dimension in this model tackles pupil-related factors such as expectations, previous knowledge, and motivations. It is recommended that the a-confessional and objective character of the study of religion be maintained also in the RE context. However, pupils may be interested in studying religions by personal motivation. In relation to the third challenge, it has been hypothesized that certain modern versions of Asian religions may be particularly appealing. Instead of dismissing such aspirations in pupils and risking a loss of motivation, it has been argued that also exploring "philosophical" or "existential" issues in RE, if made within a frame that debunks any cultural division between "East" and "West," is still coherent with our axiological and epistemological dimensions. Similarly, the Westernized versions of Asian religions should not be dismissed as inauthentic but acknowledged as an integral part of these traditions and as proofs of the plasticity of religious phenomena and the deep influence of global hegemonic discourses.



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