

## Article

# The Theme of Social Cohesion in Religious Education Policies and Practices: An Analysis of England, Japan, and Italy

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**Abstract:** Since 9/11, religious education (RE) has gained increased importance, particularly in European and American regions, though not exclusively. RE has been assigned a broader role in promoting social cohesion, especially in the context of intercultural and citizenship education. International organizations have actively contributed to this discourse through policy papers, research, and guidelines. This article, adopting a critical RE research perspective grounded in the academic study of religions, examines how the concept of social cohesion is addressed, thematized, and implemented in official documents, educational resources, and scholarly debates across three distinct RE contexts. The study pays special attention to how these processes impact the representations of religions.

**Keywords:** religious education; social cohesion; academic study of religions; critical study of religion; English RE; Japan RE; Italian RE; representation of religions; world religion paradigm

## 1. Introduction

There are different modes of religious education (RE) related to different contextual factors, especially the relationship between the states and the religious traditions of reference (Davis and Miroshnikova 2013). Scholars, in fact, came up with various classifications of RE (confessional, multi-confessional, non-confessional; integrative, separative) and their educational aims (learning into religion, from religion, about religion, out of religion) (Alberts 2007; Pajer 2014). At the same time, however, both academic and institutional debate tend to unite these different modes of RE in the face of a number of common issues. Willaime spoke of the Europeanization of challenges for RE (Willaime 2007), and it can be argued that the discourse also applies beyond European borders (Berglund et al. 2016).

Since 9/11, especially in Euro/American regions (but not limited to them), developments and discourses on RE have increasingly assumed a larger scope. Supranational institutions also actively took part in the debate with white papers, studies, and guidelines. Among the key topics addressed, there is a keen interest in conflating the theme of RE with those of coexistence within a multicultural society, intercultural dialogue/intercultural education, promotion of active citizenship, promotion of human rights and so forth (for more detail, see Section 2). In other words, we may aptly adopt the term “social cohesion” as one of the expected aims and outcomes of RE.

However, social cohesion is a term that is both easily understood and also difficult to encapsulate in a simple definition.

There is no accepted general meaning for “social cohesion”. It is an often-used term in research and policy and is regularly substituted for other terms such as “inclusion” and “integration” (Broadhead 2022, p. 9).



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In fact, its different meanings and uses have changed and developed over time. Scholars have been interested in this topic since the late 19th century, approaching it from both psychological and sociological perspectives. Social cohesion has been defined as a lack of social conflict and strong social bonds, as in the case of Durkheim (1897) in his famous study on suicide. In the psychological field, Freud defined it as “the process by which an individual recognizes themselves in others who share similar traits, thereby creating strong emotional bonds”. An influential definition by Festinger et al. (1950) had a psychological focus, emphasizing the “desire of individuals to maintain their affiliation with a group, driven especially by the same like-dislike tendencies”. Other definitions, such as Maxwell’s (1996), consider, in addition to socio-psychological factors like “shared values and a sense of a common enterprise”, also economic factors such as disparities in wealth and income. Bernard (1999) also includes the dimension of political participation (cf. Fonseca et al. 2019; Broadhead 2022).

The picture is further complicated by the fact that the definition of social cohesion can be applied both as an analytical tool to identify and measure different social dimensions and as a normative idea meant to guide politics for creating and maintaining social bonds, as is the case with the Council of Europe or the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Broadhead 2022, p. 10).

The last extensive literature review on this topic is the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe’s publication in 2023 entitled “Social Cohesion: Concept and Measurement” (UNECE 2023), which aptly summarizes the complex debates so far. Social cohesion is defined as having several dimensions: inclusion, sense of belonging, orientation to the common good, socio-economic (in)equality, quality of life, shared values, and trust in institutions (just to name a few), which are operating at different levels: individual, group, community, and institutions. A key characteristic of the definition and operationalization of social cohesion is to be context-specific. For example, a country in a certain situation may adopt policies focused on certain particular dimensions related to social cohesion. We will see the cases of England and its policy called “community cohesion” (Section 3) or the periodic reappearance of the “cults” issue in Japan and its relevance to RE (Section 3). Indeed, it is in such situations that the normative nature of the idea of social cohesion becomes conspicuous. That is, its characterization is also influenced by the main perceived threats to the social fabric, be they economic-material inequalities, lack of shared values, strong political/ideological polarizations, and so forth.

Therefore, in what follows, I do not intend to measure how much RE education policies can actually result in social cohesion. Instead, starting from a broader European and international discourse in which the religion–education pair has been attributed a strong role in the prevention of possible, albeit vaguely defined, social tensions, we will examine how the theme of social cohesion is channeled, thematized, and implemented in institutional documents, educational materials, and academic (and other) debates related to RE in three different countries.

To identify and analyze such a theme of social cohesion, I will rely on the 2023 UNECE publication mentioned above and propose a working definition of social cohesion focused on the dimensions of (1) inclusion, (2) sense of belonging, (3) shared values, and (4) orientation to the common good. Other dimensions, such as trust in institutions or socio-economic (in)equalities, have been excluded as they are likely to be less relevant to the field of discourses and practices of RE. The influence of contextual factors, often in the form of particularly traumatic events for society, will be duly emphasized. In addition, since the research perspective on RE adopted here is based on the academic study of religions, I will also probe how this influences the modalities of representations and teaching of religions.

This article analyzes three different modes of RE in their different contexts. The first case study is England, as an example of a non-confessional (or rather, multi-confessional) RE. This RE had to incorporate a policy that, prompted by a major traumatic event, expressed the need to foster “community cohesion”. The second case study is Japan. Here, there is no specific school subject for RE but under the condition of a strict prohibition of any kind of indoctrination in public schools, education on various religions is provided by different subjects, mainly Ethics. However, the topic of education towards religious phenomena is periodically revived in public and intellectual debate, especially in connection with traumatic events and social concerns related to the fervent landscape of new religious movements in Japan. Finally, the case of Italy is proposed as an example of a confessional RE, the “Teaching of the Catholic Religion”, in which the theme of social cohesion is visible in the fact that this subject is presented as a resource for the creation of common values and coexistence among different religions and cultures in a context of a steady increase in cultural and religious differences in society.

There are three research questions: (1) How has the theme of social cohesion declined in each national RE? How does this affect representations of religions? What are the similarities and differences between these RE models, and how do you explain them?

Much of the research on the relationship between RE and social cohesion offers analyses and proposals in normative and operative terms, that is, how a given RE configuration may or may not result in social cohesion and what is needed (Abu-Nimer and Smith 2016; Engebretson et al. 2010). This especially concerns England since, as will be seen, the policy of “community cohesion” has strongly influenced the academic debate on education and RE in particular (Grimmit 2010; Francis et al. 2016). This article follows the line of analytical–critical research adopted by several RE scholars who, based on the academic study of religion, aim to shed light on the political and ideological discourses implicit in the RE configurations and debates (Andreassen 2014; Kjeldsen and Jensen 2014; Alberts 2020). Although these studies are heterogeneous in the choice of topics covered (citizenship education in RE, intercultural education in RE, or national identity in RE), they relate in various ways to the issue of social cohesion. In fact, these studies also contextualize their research with the various supranational discourses mentioned above, which I will elaborate on shortly. However, for the most part, these are studies of individual nations, and the issue of social cohesion is not their central focus. Gearon (2012) takes a much broader look at the European scale, focusing on the intertwining between RE and the political agendas promoting peaceful democratic coexistence. However, he does not adopt the perspective of the academic study of religion and instead criticizes the politicization of RE because it is detrimental to the religious dimension that should instead be preserved in RE.

What follows will offer more details on the context of the supranational recommendations mentioned above and then move on to the analysis of the data for the three case studies, preceded by a brief introduction on the type and context of each of the REs examined. In the discussion section, we will comparatively examine the three case studies using a framework that focuses on the relationship between supranational and national processes and their implications for the levels of society at large, the institutional configuration of RE, and the consequences for the actual practice of teaching and learning.

In the conclusions, we will summarize the results with some closing comments from the perspective of RE based on the academic study of religion.

## 2. Recommendations and Initiatives on RE and Social Cohesion at a Supranational Level

As Jackson (2008, pp. 152, 156; 2016, pp. 14, 17) notes, the issue of religious terrorism and the related events that have occurred since 9/11 have led existing debates about inter-

cultural integration and democratic citizenship policies to place greater emphasis on the religious element.

An example on an international scale is the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) project launched by then UN Secretary Kofi Annan and the prime ministers of Spain and Turkey as a response to the “clash of civilizations” theory, to the rise of violent extremism, to polarizing perceptions, and to manifestations of xenophobia. A high-level group of experts was formed to explore the causes of these clashes and to recommend concrete action plans. The project’s five action areas include education, and in relation to religion, the high-level group report recommends the following:

Education systems, including religious schools, must provide students with an understanding and respect for the diverse religious beliefs, practices and cultures in the world. Not only citizens and religious leaders but the whole society needs a basic understanding of religious traditions other than their own and *the core teachings of compassion that are common to all religions*. (UNAOC 2006, p. 26, my italics)

We can see that the social cohesion potential of RE lies not only in the knowledge about different religions, but also in the fact that religions themselves have an intrinsic positive social value, in this case, compassion. This idea is reiterated:

Religion is an increasingly important dimension of many societies and a significant source of values for individuals. It can play a critical role in promoting an appreciation of other cultures, religions, and ways of life to help build harmony among them. (p. 6)

All [world religions] promote the ideals of compassion, justice and respect for the dignity of life. (p. 10)

According to Jackson (2008, p. 154), these UN recommendations exerted influence on another supranational body, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), a regional security-oriented intergovernmental organization comprising member states in Europe, North America, and Asia. Through its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODHIR), it published in 2007 the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*. The document’s frame of reference is the promotion of human rights, especially the right to freedom of religion and belief. It states that teaching about religions has two positive effects on society:

first, that there is positive value in a teaching that emphasizes respect for everyone’s right to freedom of religion and belief, and second, that teaching about religions and beliefs can reduce harmful misunderstandings and stereotypes. (OSCE/ODIHR 2007, p. 12)

Although without an explicit characterization of religions as carriers of inherent social benefits, it is suggested that

It may prove helpful to include in curricula reference to sources drawn from various religious and belief traditions that reinforce the significance of tolerance, respect and caring for others. (OSCE/ODIHR 2007, p. 41)

The recommendations of the UNAOC project, but also suggestions from Europe, are among the evidence cited to justify the presence of teaching about religions in public schools in the *Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States* (AAR 2010) published by the American Academy of Religion. Specifically, these pieces of evidence are summarized as such:

One of the most troubling and urgent consequences of religious illiteracy is that it often fuels prejudice and antagonism thereby hindering efforts aimed at pro-

moting respect for diversity, peaceful coexistence, and cooperative endeavors in local, national, and global arenas. (p. 5)

An even more explicit and elaborate juxtaposition between RE and education for the coexistence of plural cultures is brought forward by the Council of Europe (CoE), a human rights organization whose decision-making body is a committee made up of the ministers of foreign affairs (or diplomatic representatives) of 47 member states, of which 28 are members of the European Union. This organization launched a decade-long project entitled *Education for Democratic Citizenship* in 1997, which initially also did not include the explicit role of RE (Kjeldsen and Jensen 2014, pp. 6–8). Beginning in 2002, however, this theme gained momentum (Jackson 2008, pp. 157–58). Several initiatives have explored the motivations and ways to integrate RE, intercultural education, and citizenship education. An important and recognized policy document of the CoE is the *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* (CoE 2008). Here, in regard to the subject of RE, the following is stated:

Education as to religious and convictional facts in an intercultural context makes available knowledge about all the world religions and beliefs and their history, and enables the individual to understand religions and beliefs and avoid prejudice. (p. 30)

To further specify the relationship between RE and intercultural education, there is the document *Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)12 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the dimension of religions and nonreligious beliefs in intercultural education* (CoE 2008), which outlines some principles, objectives, requirements, and teaching aspects for implementing the religious dimension of intercultural education “in order to promote tolerance and the development of a culture of ‘living together’” (CoE 2008, p. 3). Interestingly, among other things, this document incorporates an earlier recommendation of the Parliamentary Assembly, the advisory body of the CoE, which explicitly states the following:

By teaching children the history and philosophy of the main religions with restraint and objectivity and with respect for the values of the European Convention on Human Rights, it will effectively combat fanaticism. (CoE 2005, § 7)

Not stopping at mere recommendations or abstract outlines of principles, the CoE has also launched implementation projects, the results of which have been the publication of guidelines for the teaching of religion within intercultural education, such as the *Religious Diversity and Intercultural Education: A Reference Book for Schools* (Keats 2007) and the more recent *Signposts—Policy and Practice for Teaching About Religions and Non-religious Worldviews in Intercultural education* (Jackson 2014) that explicitly incorporates the *Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)12*.

In conclusion, as observed from this cursory examination, since the early years of the 21st century, we can say that at the supranational level, various discourses at both political and, more specifically, educational levels have made clear that “RE was as now allotted an important role in efforts to solve political and social problems and in the promotion of human rights values, active democratic citizenship and intercultural dialogue” (Kjeldsen and Jensen 2014, p. 5). In this context, let us now examine the three case studies.

### 3. Social Cohesion Within English RE

RE in England is managed locally by the Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACRE). During the 1960s and 1970s, criticism of confessional RE developed, and after the 1988 Education Reform Act, SACREs comprised representatives from the Church of England, local educational authorities, local teachers, and local religious communities. SACREs agree and issue the RE syllabuses with the only national-level provisions that they “shall reflect the fact that religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Chris-

tian, whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain” and prohibiting the teaching of “any catechism or formulary which is distinctive of any particular religious denomination”.<sup>1</sup> Given the high degree of freedom assigned by this legislative framework, there is a lively debate on the theory and practice of RE, which makes the landscape of English RE rapidly evolving. Particularly since 2018, there have been major developments toward the creation of a religious and worldview education, which have gradually incorporated several important insights from the academic study of religion. These and other factors, such as the need to explain and justify the inclusion of the concept of “Worldview” have put the topic of social cohesion in a less prominent position, but without eliminating it (CoRE 2018). Therefore, we will focus not on recent years but on an earlier period in which the topic of social cohesion was particularly influential.

The British RE lends itself very well to our discussion because, starting in 2007, it had to incorporate the demands of a general political development explicitly defined as “community cohesion”. The trigger for these changes was the ominous event of 7 July 2005, in which a coordinated terrorist group of Islamists carried out a suicide attack by blowing themselves up at strategic points on the London Underground. The report *Our Shared Future* by the Commission on Integration & Cohesion (CIC 2007), which lays out the key points of this policy, states that these terrorist attacks were an opportunity for “politicians and wider society to reassess problems of alienation within particular communities, and the sense of the ‘parallel lives’ that remain in some places” (p. 15). In other words, it questions the hitherto multicultural model, which envisioned unproblematic group integration of different ethnicities and cultures simply through a legislative framework based on principles of liberal democracy and a system of public services. What is seen to be lacking is precisely the vision of a “shared future”, whether for the local community of reference or the nation as a whole, into which the contributions of different cultural, social, and ethnic backgrounds can flow, and thus avoid fragmentation of society into non-communicating social compartments.

Indeed, the *Guidance on the duty to promote community cohesion* of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DfCSF 2007) states that “Race and faith are often seen as the most frequent friction points between communities” (p. 5), and since community cohesion is built through a “common vision” and a “sense of belonging” (p. 3), schools “have a role in promoting shared values and encouraging their pupils to actively engage with others to understand what they all hold in common” (p. 6).

Diversity must, therefore, be valued in this perspective of promoting common values as well as awareness and defense of human rights (p. 7). Further details are provided by the document *Religious education in English schools: Non-statutory guidance*, also edited by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DfCSF 2010). Here, it is explicitly stated that the contribution of RE to community cohesion is to foster “understanding and appreciation of diversity, to promote shared values and to challenge racism and discrimination” (p. 7). This process is carried out, on the one hand, through the personal involvement of pupils, who must address “challenging questions about the meaning and purpose of life, beliefs, the self, issues of right and wrong, and what it means to be human” (p. 8), “explore their own beliefs (whether they are religious or non-religious)” (ib.), and “express their responses” (ib.) toward the impact on society of various religious beliefs, with the explicit goal of countering extremist and antidemocratic tendencies as well. On the other hand, pupils must “build their sense of identity and belonging, which helps them flourish within their communities and as citizens in a diverse society” and “explore how they might contribute to their communities and to wider society” (ib.).

What transpires, in my opinion, is the basic idea suggested by the report of the Commission on Integration & Cohesion (p. 110) and taken up by the *Guidance for Schools* (p. 9), that one must aim for “meaningful contact”, that is, an exchange of personal information or talking about each other’s differences and identities in order to arrive at a “common goal” or “to share an interest”. These two principles, namely the exchange of opinions and values that are foundational to a person’s identity and the identification of positive shared values, opinions, and attitudes, are well expressed in the document *A Curriculum Framework for Religious Education in England* by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (RECEW 2013). This document suggests desirable learning objectives that RE pupils should achieve, divided by age group. Already in the general objectives it is stated that obtaining knowledge of various kinds of religions is not enough, but pupils must be able to express “their personal reflections and critical responses” (p. 11) on religions and worldviews, and it is this personal engagement that allows them “to enquire into what helps different individuals and communities to live together respectfully for the wellbeing of all” (p. 12). More in detail, pupils are expected to engage with the ideas expressed by religions, notably referred to as “sources of wisdom” (p. 11), as well as with the ideas of their peers. This is meant to have them develop their personal positions on theological/moral and social issues. For example, it is stated that pupils should be able to “respond to ideas about God from different religions and worldviews, expressing ideas of their own and commenting on some ideas of others” (p. 20); again, “pupils consider the Ten Commandments (Jewish) and the Five Precepts (Buddhist), expressing their ideas about right and wrong in the light of their learning.” In this regard it is noteworthy that, in reference to pupils aged 11 to 14, it is explicitly stated that “[e]ngagement with controversial issues is at the heart of good RE and one aim of the subject is to enable respectful disagreement.” (p. 26). The expected outcomes of these exchanges, in addition to increased awareness of one’s identity, include positive elements for social cohesion. For example, in reference to younger pupils, it is suggested that they draw inspiration from the stories of cooperation told in the books of different traditions to create a “recipe for living together happily” (p. 20). More mature pupils are suggested, for example, to “discover and explore what Jewish people, humanists and Christians teach about how people can live together for the well-being of all” (p. 23). The emphasis on the dimensions of shared values and common good is even more overt when the documents state that advanced students should “make compelling and reasonable connections between what religions and worldviews teach and what they say about issues such as starvation around the world, the sanctity of life, environmental ethics, war or prejudice” (p. 27).

How do these general principles impact the pedagogical framework of RE and the conceptualization and representation of religions? Among the most extensive research on the impact of community cohesion policy on English RE is the work of Japanese scholar Fujiwara (2017). She especially focused on the comparative analysis of around 170 textbooks published both before and after the implementation of the community cohesion policy, particularly those published in the 2010s. The results show that there is a clear shift from the previous approach, which implemented a multicultural and somewhat ethnographic approach, i.e., an attempt to familiarize people with different practices and beliefs while refraining from making judgments in order to avoid imposing a particular grid of values on a different religion and culture. Instead, the community cohesion approach links together the analysis of social and ethical aspects of religions and the need to address the pressing issues of contemporary society (Fujiwara 2017, pp. 165–96). In other words, religions are seen as a reservoir of insights, issues, and especially solutions for a whole range of issues, which are often considered controversial and divisive. Thus, it is not only, for example, the problem of religious violence to be addressed in RE, but also economic inequality,

bioethics, same-sex relations, minority rights, and environmental protection. Not only do religions offer suggestions or judgments towards society, but pupils themselves are called to be active participants and apply their own judgment towards religions. If previously it was neutrality to be applied in front of a believer's value system, now pupils should evaluate it and even offer advice on it while still being respectful. Clearly, this implies an implicit but influential contemporary value stance through which religions are judged on the basis of their being fit or beneficial to society (pp. 207–20).

As a result, there is a tendency toward a monolithic and paradoxically homogenizing representation of the various religions as coherent systems of beliefs and practices that, on the one hand, differ in their doctrinal tenets but on the other hand, are all equally respectful of the environment, engaged in compassionate activities, and promoters of peace (pp. 198–206). A case in point is the representation of Buddhism (Fujiwara 2017, pp. 220–29; 2019). In textbooks prior to the community cohesion policy, representations of Buddhism offered somewhat exotic imagery, accentuating the differences to be understood and focusing on examples from, for example, Japan or Tibet—which were the traditions of reference for most English converts. In the new textbooks, however, along with pages on religious practices, there are also descriptions of community-serving Buddhists, often of different ethnicities, engaged, for example, in reforestation work. A noteworthy example is the presentation of the famous monk-activist Thich Nhat Hanh as a Buddhist authority of reference. In addition, more space is given to Theravada traditions, especially the Sinhalese tradition, since most immigrant Buddhists are connected to this type of religion (and ethical background). This reflects concern for the inclusion of immigrant or ethnically diverse communities.

An important consequence of representing religions in this way and of setting up the study of them through a discussion of their social and moral contributions is the representation of the adherents of these traditions. If the goal is an exchange of views between the personal position of each learner and the moral/social position of each religion, it is easy to give the illusion that every behavior and moral decision of adherents is exclusively dictated by their religions of belonging. One example is what Fujiwara calls the “Islamization of Buddhism” (Fujiwara 2019, pp. 13–15), namely the fact that the Noble Eightfold Path and the Five Precepts are treated as a sort of Buddhist “Sharia” that strictly binds all Buddhists' behavior and choices. This is evident in one unit of a textbook that aims to reflect on the relationship between Buddhism, work, and employment. Assuming that “The Five Precepts mean that Buddhists should not undertake careers that lead to harm, taking what is not freely given, lying, sexual misconduct or involvement with intoxicating substances” (Kolka 2012, p. 60, cited in Fujiwara 2019, p. 15), the conclusion is that no Buddhist could be a soldier, meatworker, or anesthesiologist. Indeed, this rigid assertion clashes with the reality of Buddhist-majority nations or communities where these professional figures are obviously present, and it ignores the internal differentiation and socio-cultural plasticity of Buddhist moral precepts (see, e.g., Crosby 2013, pp. 123–25).

It should also be noted that the policy of community cohesion was not necessarily a watershed within English RE. It is true, as Fujiwara (2017, pp. 3–4) notes that, earlier, the influence of RE approaches inspired by anthropology was strong and then shifted to more philosophical perspectives. However, the theoretical and practical debate on RE has always been particularly varied (Alberts 2007), and indeed, similar approaches were already present. Some of them, moreover, also have theoretical and educational principles that are very much in line with some of the institutional recommendations discussed above. I am referring in particular to famous RE authors such as L. Philip Barnes and Andrew Wright (and colleagues),<sup>2</sup> who share a predilection for philosophy and theology as disciplines of reference for RE and a fierce critique of a type of RE that they describe as phenomenological

since it aims at getting pupils to bracket (*epoché*) their own beliefs in order to open themselves to an experience of the sacred common to all religions and thus curb intolerance. Barnes and Wright charge these and other similar RE approaches with the accusation of flattening all the religions together, minimizing their differences, especially those related to the truth claims of their doctrines. According to these authors, religious plurality, often characterized by incommensurability between the different metaphysical and moral doctrines inscribed in the various holy books, must be addressed in a straightforward manner. That is, pupils should be equipped with knowledge about religions' belief systems and with philosophical and moral reasoning skills in order for "attention to be given to the forms of evidence to which religions appeal and to the kinds of assessment that are relevant to the consideration of this evidence" (Barnes 2014, p. 241). Similarly, Wright assumes that religious people, agnostics, and atheists are at the same level in their holding of beliefs/positions about the ultimate nature of reality (cf. Wright 2004, p. 52). Therefore, Wright states the following:

It is not acceptable for a teacher to attempt to impose a particular worldview on students, *nor is it sufficient for students to merely express an unjustified personal preference* for one belief system or another. Instead, by cultivating a deep understanding of students' horizons of meaning and the horizons of various religious and secular traditions, religious education should aim to empower *students to make informed judgments about the ultimate nature of reality and the implications of this for the way in which they choose to live their lives.* (Wright et al. 2019, p. 3, my italics)

It is clear how the above-mentioned principles of "meaningful contact" (CIC 2007, p. 110) and of expressing "personal reflections and critical responses" (RECEW 2013, p. 11) return in these RE approaches, in which religions are presented not as socio-historical phenomena, but as systems of thought and values to be discussed, to take insight from, and also to criticize. In fact, these RE models greatly emphasize the incommensurability and mutual exclusion of different religious truth claims and are less prone to finding points of contact between different religions. Rather, the concrete contribution they intend to make to community cohesion policy is identified in two points. The first is to familiarize pupils with the inevitable disagreement and conflict of views in a plural society (Barnes 2014, pp. 238–40; Wright et al. 2019, p. 12). The second is to equip pupils with reasoning and dialectical skills to question possible harmful beliefs, "for example the belief that some races are superior to others, or that God commands indiscriminate, large-scale violence as part of lesser jihad" (Wright et al. 2019, p. 13).

In summary, we can say that the concept and goal of social cohesion articulated in the English RE is to create inclusion among different religious groups not only by providing mere knowledge of different religions but mainly through confrontation and exchange of views, including personal ones. This is meant to find points of contact and possible insights that can be beneficial to society at large, not only from a social or moral point of view but also regarding, for example, environmental preservation. In other words, we find the dimensions of orientation toward a common good and of the establishment of (potential) shared values. However, a sense of belonging is also believed to arise from the active involvement of pupils, even on potentially controversial issues, such as value systems or theological positions, on which personal evaluations are required. Not only that, but it is also believed that the exercise of criticism of religious positions, either in general or of one's classmates, on the one hand, creates the critical spirit that can counter extremist or antidemocratic positions and, on the other, reinforces a contemporary, liberal, and democratic value system that implicitly remains in the background as the shared ultimate term of reference.

As a result, religions tend to be represented as coherent, monolithic belief and value systems that are easily comparable with each other in terms of their moral directions and possible contribution to society. Precisely because they are homogeneously comparable with each other, students are called upon firsthand to compare and argue, even critically, for the consistency or not of the truth claims of their own religion and those of others, including the positions of atheism or agnosticism. In addition to posing a possible problem of disclosure of intimate issues on the part of pupils, this approach tends to represent adherents of any religion as one-dimensional individuals whose character, behavior, and worldview are totally dictated by the religion they belong to.

#### 4. Social Cohesion Within Japanese RE<sup>3</sup>

In Japan, the administration of school education is managed in a very centralized manner; the syllabuses are detailed and defined by the government, and textbooks must pass an official examination before they can be accredited and put on the market (Takahata 2013, p. 181). Japan's constitution prescribes a strict division between state and religion, with particular reference to the issue of education. Article 20 enshrines both freedom of religion and the inability of any religious group to receive any state support. Subsection 3 of the same article states that no state body may conduct "religious teaching or other religious activity."<sup>4</sup> Such provisions are also related to Japan's wartime past, in which so-called State Shinto was an integral part of ideology and indoctrination by the totalitarian government (Hardacre 2017, pp. 335–41). Similarly, the Basic Act on Education of 1947 (predating the 2006 reform, see below) also reads as follows:

The attitude of religious tolerance and the position of religion in the social life shall be valued in education. (2) The schools established by the state and local public bodies shall refrain from religious education or the activities for specified religion.<sup>5</sup>

Concretely, education about religions in Japan is not done through a specific subject, but this topic is covered in various subjects such as World History, History of Japan, Geography, Contemporary Society, and, most importantly, Ethics (*rinri*), an upper secondary school subject, which will be analyzed in more detail in this section.

Despite the lack of a dedicated subject, the topic of teaching religion in school has periodically emerged in Japan's recent institutional, intellectual, and social history, especially linked to concerns about social cohesion and traumatic events in Japanese society. From the 1960s onward, various issues related to lower secondary and upper school pupils, such as bullying, violence, and chronic absenteeism, have called into question the effectiveness of the teachings of Morality (*dotoku*) and Ethics (*rinri*) that had recently been incorporated into the curricula (Foreign Press Center 2001, pp. 19–25). The interesting point is that the Central Board of Education (*chūo kyōiku shingikai*), the main advisory board of the Ministry of Education, in discussing ways to deal with such problems, introduces (actually gets back to<sup>6</sup>) a key notion that of "cultivation of religious sentiment" (*shūkyōteki jōsō kyōiku*), as a possible way to counter the lowering of moral standards, lack of respect, and consideration for others and society. In the addendum<sup>7</sup> to the Council's report of 31 October 1966, the following is stated:

Any kind of religious feeling comes from a sense of reverence for the origin of life. It is not we ourselves who generated our life. The source of our life lies in the life of our parents, in the life of our ethnicity, in the life of humankind. Here we do understand life as mere biological life, but as spiritual life. The sense of reverence for such a source of life, that is, the sacred, is the authentic religious

feeling. Love and respect for mankind is also based on it, deep gratitude grows out of it, and true happiness is also based on it. (1.1.5)

From this period on, debates on the teaching of religion in school revolved around three key categories: the confessional teaching of religion (*kyōha kyōiku*), the teaching of knowledge about religion (*shūkyō chishiki kyōiku*), and this category of cultivation of religious sentiment. The latter has had several developments. For example, in 1986, religious sentiment was further defined in institutional documents as “a spirit of reverence for a force that transcends human beings” (Tsuchiya 2008, p. 3). Given this ambiguous nature, it has been the most discussed category, especially among religious scholars (Tsuchiya 2008, p. 4; Inoue 2009, pp. 586–87).

Further inflaming the debates on these issues was the traumatic event of the Tokyo subway bombing in 1995 by the religious group Aum Shinri Kyō (Baffelli 2018), which involved well-educated young people from good social backgrounds as perpetrators. In fact, around 2003, the Central Council took up the theme of the importance of religion in school education (Filius 2006, p. 1041), but did so, according to Sonntag (2005),

... exclusively from two perspectives, that of globalization, i.e., to understand the events in other “more religious” countries, and from the necessity to save both individuals and society from unlawful acts and acts threatening the social security of the community taken by “pseudo-religious organizations” (*giji shūkyō dantai*) or “doctrinal groups” (*kyōgi shūdan*). (p. 67)

At the same time, a 2003 report by the Ministry of Education reaffirmed the importance of the cultivation of religious sentiment. In addition, further political developments directly and indirectly intertwined with the issue of religious education: Around 2005, there was a debate about a proposal for revision of the constitution by the majority party, the Liberal Democratic Party, in which the topic of nationalism and patriotism was linked to the issue of the relationship between the state and Shinto. They discussed the possibility of allowing politicians to participate in Shinto religious ceremonies as a “traditional custom” rather than as a religion and discussed the relationship of this tradition with an alleged “uniqueness” of Japanese culture<sup>8</sup> (Filius 2006, pp. 1042–50). It is important to note here that in postwar Japan, especially in the period between the 1970s and the 1990s, there has been a strong influence of the so-called *nihonjinron* (theory of the Japanese people) discourse, which permeated many media, especially books for the general public, but also academic works, and argued for the peculiarity of Japanese culture, often pointing at Shinto as the fountainhead of such uniqueness (Befu 2001). Furthermore, around the same period, the revision process of the Basic Act on Education was near completion and was promulgated in 2006. Again, there has been a debate relevant to RE. The Atarashii kyōiku kihonhō wo motomeru kai (Society for the new Basic Act of Education), of which a former prime minister was a member, proposed to adopt measures enhancing the “respect for traditions and patriotism” and the “cultivation of religious sentiment and the strengthening of moral education” (Fujiwara 2007, p. 47). Actually, due to the ambiguity of the term “religious sentiment” and the reservations of the allied party of the Liberal Democrats, the Kōmeito, which is linked to a particular new religion, the Soka Gakkai, the aforementioned Article 9 of the old Fundamental Law on Education became the new Article 15 with only a slight change in the first sentence:

The attitude of religious tolerance, a general learning regarding religion and the position of religion in the social life, shall be valued in education.<sup>9</sup>

However, as can be noted in the transcripts of the question time in parliament related to the reform of the law in question<sup>10</sup>, this does not mean that the aforementioned idea of eliciting a sense of “reverence for a force that transcends human beings” (Tsuchiya 2008, p.

3) has been abandoned. Fujiwara (2011, pp. ix–xi) also observes that in 2009 the curriculum (*gakushū shidō yōryō*) of the subject Ethics, as well as some informal guidance from the ministry given to textbook publishers, implied not so veiledly that this kind of moralizing dimension was intended and that it was related to some key words and ideas in the above-mentioned debate on religious sentiment. Indeed, in the latest version (MEXT 2018)<sup>11</sup> of the annotated curriculum (*gakushū shidō yōryō kaisetsu*) for the subject Ethics, the official educational objectives are stated as follows:

To cultivate the civic qualities and skills necessary to be active participants of a peaceful and democratic nation and society, which live independently in a globalized international society, based on a spirit of respect for humanity and reverence for life, through activities that stimulate views and ideas on how we should be and live as human beings, pursuing various issues related to contemporary ethics, society and culture, and reflecting on their solutions. (p. 85).

According to the commentary on the passage “based on a spirit of respect for humanity and reverence for life”, the learner should consider how human life “arises and exists in relationship and harmony with all life” (p. 87), human and non-human, and the wording seems to imply that such “life” is to be respected as if it were something transcendent, which recalls the idea of the sacredness of life present in the above-mentioned addendum to the Council’s report of 31 October 1966. For example, one verb used is *osoreru* 畏れる, which indicates a sense of respect and awe in the face of something powerful, related by homophony to the verb *osoreru* 恐れる “to be afraid”, and graphically to the noun *ikei* 畏敬 “reverence” (ib.).

Concretely, how does the subject of ethics pursue the above purposes? By exposing learners to the “broad intellectual accumulation from all the world, past and present” (p. 88), which also includes religions. Such knowledge should directly influence the learner’s personal reflections on their worldview and values and on the very mode of existence of human beings (p. 86), thus enabling him/her to develop their personality and capacity to deal with ethical issues as an active member of society (pp. 89–90). In other words, religions, along with the philosophies of Socrates, Aristotle, the Enlightenment, or the concept of the social contract or democracy, are all, precisely, ethical–philosophical resources that the learner must harness for their own personal growth (pp. 98–101).

As we go into more detail about the content related to religions, it becomes more clearly delineated how their representation serves what we may define as social cohesion goals, particularly in the dimensions of inclusion, shared values, and orientation toward the common good.

In the case of Christianity, it is suggested that the learner reflect on the ethical notions arising from the conception of mankind in relation to the idea of the Christian god, original sin, and grace. First and foremost, to reflect on the ethical notion of unconditional love (Gr. *agápē*) and the dictum of “love thy neighbor”. Concerning Islam, it is suggested that in relation to Muhammad’s instructions concerning the creation of the Islamic community, particularly the obligation of mutual aid and contribution to society,<sup>12</sup> the learner should reflect on the ways of being a community and managing mutual ties in relation to law, politics, and economics. Concerning Buddhism, it is suggested that, on the basis of Buddhist notions such as non-ego, impermanence, the origin and overcoming of suffering, and compassion toward all forms of life, the learner should reflect on the importance of life and on the correct way to live as human beings. Regarding Confucianism, it is suggested that the learner should reflect on how to lead a social life by building desirable social relationships while also giving importance to empathic understanding based on key Confucian notions such as humanity (Cn. *ren*) or appropriate behavior (Cn. *li*). It is interesting to note at this point that the annotated curriculum also mentions thinkers such as Laozi or Zhuangzi,

but in a completely cursory manner. One might speculate that, since the doctrines of these thinkers tend toward rather individualistic or pseudo-anarchical ethical propositions, the text has made mere lip service to a religious–philosophical tradition that has nonetheless been influential in East Asian history (pp. 98–99).

Another important observation is the repetition of two key phrases in all of the instructions just cited, namely, “connect to questions of the self” (*jiko no kadai wo musubitsuku*) and “overlap with matters of the self” (*jiko no kadai to kasaneawaseru*) (ib.). In other words, there is a clear indication for the learner to approach religions, or rather, the doctrines of religions, as philosophical–ethical resources for one’s personal growth.

There is a further dimension of social cohesion in the annotated curriculum for the subject Ethics, that of the sense of belonging, which can be observed in the educational objective of acquiring the “awareness of being a Japanese living in an international society” (p. 104). According to the text, the learner, through exposure to the tradition and culture of their country, should develop respect toward them, make them part of the formation of oneself, and deepen awareness of one’s distinctiveness (*tokushitsu*) as a Japanese. Here, the learning contents are again very much related to religion, such as Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism. In particular, regarding Shinto, there is some reference to the *nihonjinron* discourse mentioned earlier about the supposed specificity of Japanese culture. “Primordial shinto” (*genshi shintō*) is defined as the base on which currents of thought and religions coming from outside Buddhism and Confucianism *in primis* were introduced. This base is said to function as a kind of undercurrent that absorbs and adapts outside influences to the Japanese culture (pp. 106–7), whose distinctiveness is thus kept intact.

How is this reflected in textbooks? An influential study by Fujiwara (2011)<sup>13</sup> critically analyzed the representation of religions in textbooks. It focused particularly on ethics textbooks since textbooks on history, geography, and contemporary society often tend to summarize the contents of ethics texts (pp. 46–48). According to Fujiwara, the main problems concern the treatment of Christianity and Buddhism, not only from the perspective of the academic study of religion but sometimes even in relation to the constitutional principle of non-proselytizing in public schools. Consistent with the annotated curriculum discussed above, Christianity and Buddhism are represented and often even praised as if they were coherent systems of thought with positive effects. Christianity is often reduced to the simple idea of unconditional love (*agápē*) (pp. 5–8) and linked to the promotion of pacifism (pp. 49–52). Often, such “virtues” of Christianity are emphasized through comparison with Judaism, stereotyped instead as a religion of formalism, law, and exclusion, in the same way that the “virtues” of Buddhism are emphasized through comparison with the caste discrimination of Hinduism (pp. 66–82).

Still, regarding Buddhism, it is interesting to note that in the textbooks analyzed by Fujiwara, a connection is often drawn between Buddhism and ecology, justifying it with the concepts of compassion (*jīhi*), dependent origination (*engi*), and the nature of Buddha present in every being (*issai shūjō shītu ubushhō*). Through Buddhism, the texts enact a discourse that could be read from the perspective of fostering a sense of belonging: compared with Christianity and Western culture *tout court*, Buddhism is often extolled as a religion based on rational reflection and in harmony with nature, in contrast to a prayer-based Christianity that inspired instead a nature-subduing West (pp. 8–11, 48–49, 60–64).

Similarly, when textbooks address topics related to the educational objective of “awareness of being a Japanese living in an international society” (MEXT 2018, p. 104), while rarely mentioning the term Shinto—perhaps due to concerns linked to wartimes—they illustrate the relationship the Japanese people entertain with the idea of *kami* (the divinities in Shinto) more as a way of thinking, rather than as an actual religion. Often the term used is “animism” (*animizumu*), but not in a deterrent sense. Instead, it is used in a posi-

tive sense, for example, of respect for nature. For Fujiwara, it is evident the influence of a *nihonjinron* discourse (Fujiwara 2011, pp. 103–12). It should be noted at this point that the 2018 annotated curriculum cautions against falling into an attitude of rigid and exclusivist reverence for one's own culture (MEXT 2018, pp. 108–9). However, it is also possible to read this admonition as a sort of “patch” in response to received criticism, such as that of Fujiwara. In fact, if we refer to the lesson on “the concept of religion and ethics of the Japanese” on the Kōkōkōza (lessons for high school) website,<sup>14</sup> we find content similar to what has already been mentioned: that the worship of *kami* originates from a worship of nature itself or the fact that Japanese culture is stratified in the sense that the original cultural layers always subsume the newer ones from outside.

Concerning the public, intellectual, and political debate on the teaching of religion in school, an important event showed how the issue of religious education in Japan is very much linked to the issue of social cohesion. On 8 July 2022, ex-Prime Minister Abe Shinzo was assassinated during a rally. The confessed murderer, Yamagami Tetsuya, explained that the reasons for his act lay in the relations between Abe and the new Christian-based religious movement originating in Korea, called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, more commonly known as the Unification Church or the “Moonies”. Yamagami's grudge against Abe originated from the fact that his mother had gone bankrupt because of donations to the Unification Church.<sup>15</sup> This incident reignited the debate on the issue of “cults” in Japan as the second major traumatic event after the aforementioned 1995 Tokyo subway attack.

In fact, a few months later, NHK, the national TV broadcaster, organized a series of roundtable discussions broadcasted via its YouTube channel, in which influential intellectuals and scholars of religions gathered to discuss various aspects of this “cult” issue, one of which is precisely “religious literacy” (*shūkyō riterashii*) and how to enhance it.<sup>16</sup> In one video, Kohara Katsuhiro, a Protestant theologian, says that the lack of religious literacy, as in the case of France and Japan, prevents people from being able to recognize the dangerousness of certain religious phenomena and thus being deceived. This does not happen; instead, in situations such as in Germany, where “learning the basics of traditional religions as literacy acts as breakwater to cult-related stuff.”<sup>17</sup> Shaku Tesshū, chancellor of Soai Buddhist University, recalls the recommendations from the aforementioned Central Board of Education, including those arguing that knowledge about religions provides “immunity” against the problem of “cults” and “mind control.”<sup>18</sup> This is not only the opinion of religious insiders from long-established religions that may feel threatened by new religious movements but also of scholars. Sociologist Sakurahi Yoshihide stated on several occasions that “Due to a lack of religious literacy, Japanese people are often unable to deal with religious issues on their own and thus easily recruited to controversial religions” (Sakurahi 2023).<sup>19</sup> Another renowned scholar, Shimazono Susumu, opens the panel discussion on religious literacy by asking precisely whether a basic understanding of religions cannot prevent people from naively joining religious groups that turn out to be harmful.<sup>20</sup>

In summary, we can say that in Japanese RE, the conception and implementation of social cohesion consist of “harnessing” religions as reservoirs of—carefully cherry-picked—positive values to be inculcated in students as shared values that can orient toward the common good. One can also see a tendency to nurture a sense of belonging that sometimes has religious nuances. It seems that the idea of a “reverence for a force that transcends the human being” of the 1980s has not entirely waned. The sense of belonging is also stimulated through a discourse on the uniqueness of the Japanese's religious way of being or through an assessment of Buddhism as superior to Christianity or the West in general. Finally, another important contribution relevant to social cohesion that is explic-

itly expected from RE is to help prevent the spreading of phenomena that might harm it, such as joining harmful new religious movements.

As a result, religions are portrayed monolithically, as if they were coherent systems of thought on a par with philosophical currents or doctrines of individual thinkers. Only certain positive aspects of certain religions, mostly Christianity and Buddhism, are selected and, in addition, positively emphasized through comparisons with other religions such as Judaism and Hinduism, which thus result as inferior. Moreover, there is the idea that the learner must somehow embrace the positive messages of religions, paradoxically going against the constitutional prohibition of religious proselytizing through public institutions (Fujiwara 2011, pp. 2–20).

## 5. Social Cohesion Within Italian RE

Italian RE is more properly called Teaching of Catholic Religion (*insegnamento della religione cattolica*) (hereafter: TCR). The current configuration of TCR is an evolution of a former, explicitly catechetical nurturing into Catholic Christianity, which was implemented after the 1929 Lateran Pacts between the Fascist regime and the Holy See. In the 1960s and 1970s, debates arose on whether this subject may be modified in light of the emerging cultural and religious pluralism. As a result, in the 1984 revision of the Concordat, TCR was redesigned as a non-compulsory confessional Catholic teaching, no longer aimed at catechesis but with a cultural approach to religion, with specific reference to Catholicism. In this sense, it is considered in line with the educational aims of the school, and it is open to Catholic pupils as well as to those of other religions and non-believers. However, the principle that TCR is to “conform to the doctrine of the Church” (art. 1.1 Presidential Decree no. 751 of 16/12/1985) remains firm. In fact, it is the Catholic Church that maintains control over the training and suitability of teachers, and the RE curricula are jointly agreed upon between the Italian Episcopal Conference and the Italian government.

The curricula currently in force were promulgated in 2010 for primary and lower-secondary schools (*Attachment to the Presidential Decree of 11/02/2010*, hereafter [APD 2010](#)) and in 2012 for upper-secondary schools (*Teaching Instructions for the Teaching of Catholic Religion in the Second Cycle of Education*, hereafter [TCRSCE 2012](#)). In general, we can say that Catholic RE justifies its presence in Italian schools by affirming that having pupils engage with the religious dimension, especially that of Catholicism, fosters a “full development of the person” (*piena formazione della persona*) ([APD 2010](#), p. 3) or a “comprehensive development of the person” (*formazione globale della persona*) ([TCRSCE 2012](#), p. 1), which basically intersects with all the other knowledge taught in the public school and the whole process of education, as a sort of moral and metaphysical framing.

In this way, social cohesion is also present. For example, among the learning objectives relevant to this educational goal is the idea that by teaching the child that “God is father of all” and that the “church is a community”, s/he is able to “develop a positive sense of self and experience peaceful relationships with others, including those belonging to different cultural and religious traditions”. Similarly, by understanding that the world is “a gift from God”, s/he is able to “develop feelings of responsibility toward reality” ([APD 2010](#), p. 3). We see here the dimensions of orientation toward the common good and that of inclusion. This latter is also linked to the sense of belonging, as it is argued that knowledge of Catholicism is an “important aspect of the cultural identity of belonging” and, therefore, “helps relationships and relations between people of different cultures and religions”.

The dimension of inclusion, especially toward other religions, is arguably the most emphasized. In this regard, however, the theological logic behind it must also be explained. As is well known, one of the founding documents of the interreligious dialogue of the post-Vatican II Catholic Church is the conciliar declaration *Nostra Aetate*, which states that all

religions “often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men” (Paul VI 1965, §2). In other words, there is a theology of inclusion and subsumption vis-à-vis other religions, recognized as an (incomplete) part of Christian revelation. From this, it also follows that fundamentally, there exists a common basis of religiosity among all people (and by implication, that Catholicism is its most complete expression). Indeed, it is stated in the curricula that the learner will acquire knowledge of the “universal questions of man”, which are understood as the common ground of comparison between Catholicism and other religions (TCRSCE 2012, pp. 2, 6, 10, 11, 13; APD 2010, p. 6). Therefore, TCR is presented as a subject particularly suitable for developing the skills of interreligious and intercultural dialogue:

The student is open to the sincere search for truth and knows how to reflect about transcendence and endeavor in a quest for meaning, grasping the intertwining of the religious and cultural dimensions. Starting from the context in which She lives, he knows how to interact with people of different religions, developing an identity capable of acceptance, encounter and dialogue. (APD 2010, p. 7)

Within this horizon, it offers content and tools for a systematic reflection on the complexity of human existence within the open encounter between Christianity and other religions, between Christianity and other systems of meaning. TRC, in the current multicultural context, through its proposal, promotes among students participation in an authentic and constructive dialogue, educating to the exercise of freedom in a perspective of justice and peace. (TCRSCE 2012, p. 1)

In recent years, due to the increase in immigration rates and the constant presence of the themes of immigration and integration in the public debate, the issue of pluralism and interreligious/intercultural dialogue in Catholic RE has also been further emphasized. The *Letter to Teachers of the Catholic Religion* of the Italian Episcopal Conference—Episcopal Commission for Catholic Education, Schools and Universities pushes toward an enhancement of the study of other cultures and religions (CEI 2017, pp. 1, 2), thus triggering a debate on TCR’s potential for interreligious and intercultural dialogue in spite of, or rather in virtue of, its absence of neutrality and distance toward religious facts (Macale 2020a, 2020b; Porcarelli 2020, 2022). Observers of such a trend have been prompted to define TCR in transition toward being a “Catholic hour of religions” (Ventura 2022, p. 39). Not surprisingly, not a few textbooks have titles and covers that point towards ideals of inclusion and dialogue among people of different backgrounds instead of more Christianity-focused imagery. For example, the cover of the textbooks *We Are the Others (Gli altri siamo noi)*, Maglioli (2020), *All the Voices of the World (Tutte le voci del mondo)*, Solinas (2014), and *Itineraries 2.0 plus (Itinerari 2.0 plus)*, Contadini (2016).

Another dimension of social cohesion present in the TCR is the promotion of shared values. The curricula affirm that through the study of the historical development of the church, the learner is able to grasp the contributions of Catholicism to modern “civic values” (*valori civili*) (TCRSCE 2012, p. 3) or, more generally, the contributions to the construction of shared European culture (TCRSCE 2012, pp. 6, 7, 10, 11). In concrete terms, such contributions in terms of values are as follows:

the value of life and the dignity of the person according to the Christian view: fundamental rights, freedom of conscience, responsibility for the common good and the promotion of peace, and commitment to social justice. (TCRSCE 2012, pp. 6, 10, 14)

This dimension related to the promotion of civic values has been further strengthened after the enactment of the *Law on the Teaching of Civic Education in School* (Law No. 92, 20 August 2019), according to which a total of 33 h of Civic Education lessons must be taught during the school year, not within a specific teaching, but delivered by different types of

teachers within their classes. TCR teachers too can deliver within their classes these hours of civics lessons. Furthermore, another factor that contributed to characterizing TCT as having a civic educational value is the publication in 2016 of Pope Francis' encyclical *Praise Be to You (Laudato si')* (Francis 2015), which advocates, from a Catholic perspective, the need for sustainable growth and environmental protection, which is indeed one of the three principles of Civic Education according to the aforementioned law. Although there are still no data on how many teachers currently have taken on this role, we can infer that they are in such numbers that the Italian Union of Rationalist Agnostics Atheists has mobilized in protest since, according to one possible interpretation of the law, the TCR hour in which Civic Education is delivered would become compulsory even for pupils who opted out of TCR.<sup>21</sup>

Unlike the previous two case studies, which were characterized by a non-confessional situation, in the case of TCR, the confessional situation greatly influences how religions are represented. As one would logically expect, Christianity, especially the Catholic denomination, is the religion most represented and addressed in detail in its theological (in a manner scrupulously adhering to ecclesiastical orthodoxy), ritual, historical, biblical, and artistic aspects. The aspects of the representation of Christianity that are most relevant to our theme of social cohesion, however, are those defined as the “effects that historically the Catholic religion has produced and produces in Italian, European, and world culture” (TCRSCE 2012, p. 1) and those related to the ethical dimension. Regarding the latter, the guidelines indicate, for example, that the learner should be able to “confront the Christian proposal of life as an original contribution to the realization of a free and responsible life-project” (APD 2010, p. 8) or to identify “on the ethical-religious level the potentialities and risks related to economic, social, and environmental development, globalization and multiculturalism, new technologies and ways of accessing knowledge” (TCRSCE 2012, p. 1). Such ethical aspects of Christianity and Catholicism, especially when applied to contemporary issues, are often linked in concrete practice to the promotion of civic values and civic education mentioned above. In this sense, it is not a surprise that Catholic Christianity is also represented as a force promoting social cohesion.

On the other hand, regarding the representation of other religions, the curricula give little guidance:

Know the origins and development of Christianity and other major religions by identifying the most important aspects of interreligious dialogue. (APD 2010, p. 6)

Identify the specific elements of Christian prayer and also compare them with those of other religions. (p. 8)

...recognize the universal questions of man: origin and future of the world and man, good and evil, meaning of life and death, hopes and fears of mankind, and the answers Christianity gives to them, also comparing them with other religions. (TCRSCE 2012, p. 2)

How is this reflected in textbooks? The few studies that analyze the representation of religions in textbooks from the perspective of the academic study of religions refer to curricula that predate those currently in place (Caramagno 2015; Caramagno and Giorda 2018). I will, therefore, take some additional space and analyze some current textbooks in which the theme of social cohesion is conspicuous. I chose to focus on the upper-secondary schools as they take up the content of texts from previous cycles, adding more detail and depth of analysis. TCR textbooks must receive mandatory clearance from the Italian bishops' Conference.<sup>22</sup>

Regarding the portrayal of Christianity as a force promoting social cohesion, the most conspicuous element, which is present in virtually every textbook, is the portrayal

of Catholicism as an active promoter of interreligious dialogue for peace. In such contexts, the above-mentioned conciliar declaration, *Nostra Aetate*, is often cited, and concrete examples are offered, such as the famous interreligious prayer meeting in Assisi organized by Pope John Paul II in 1986. Other dimensions of social cohesion, such as inclusion, shared values, and promotion of the common good, are present in those parts of the textbooks that emphasize the contribution of Christianity to modern moral and civic values. For example, there is the chapter with the explicit title “TCR and Human Rights” in the textbook *Heaven in Our Hands (Il cielo tra le mani, Bocchini and Fontanella 2023)*, which points to the contribution of Christianity to the emergence of human rights (p. 352) and emphasizes the importance of the rights of equality and freedom, especially religious freedom. It also stresses the need for a more just society and how Catholics are engaged in social work (pp. 350–70). The same book also has a chapter titled “Responsible Citizens”, which, inspired also by the aforementioned encyclical *Laudato Si*, engages with sustainability issues such as peace, environmental protection, and responsible consumption. The Christian–Catholic dimension of this exhortation to responsible citizenship is underscored by the section entitled “Children of the Same Father” (pp. 400–2). Ecological or inclusion themes are found in many other texts: In the text *Meeting the Other (Incontro all’altro, Bocchini 2015)*, the chapter “Citizens of the World” contains sections entitled “Against all Discrimination” (pp. 249–50), “Putting a Bet on Creation, Peace, and the Environment” (p. 256), and “Breaking Down Walls”. In Italy, the main association against mafias, *Libera*, although not having a religious connotation, was founded by a Catholic presbyter, Don Luigi Ciotti. Therefore, it is not difficult to find this theme in several texts. In the text *The New: Come on, Let’s Go! (Il nuovo: Coraggio, Andiamo! Cristiani and Motto 2018)*, the chapter “Christianity and the New Challenges” combines the already mentioned themes of the safeguarding of creation (pp. 442–44) with the contrast with the social, cultural, and economic problem of mafias with the section “Mafia: Civilization of Death” (pp. 438–40). Interestingly, in this text, an additional multimedia resource to the chapter “Christianity and Human Action” even concerns the duty to pay taxes (p. 10). Again on mafias, the text *Cards on the Table (A carte scoperte, Contadini and Frezzotti 2019)* has a chapter dedicated to the theme of freedom, which puts together the critique of slavery (p. 102) with the theme of freedom from mafias by citing precisely the *Libera* association (*libera* means “free” in Italian) (p. 106).

Regarding the portrayal of other religions, we must recall that the curricula indicate delivering the topic in a way that emphasizes elements useful to make comparisons and set up interreligious dialogue, especially with regard to the aforementioned “universal questions of man” (TCRSCE 2012, p. 2). As a result, while ample space is given in the case of Christianity and Catholicism to illustrate their historical development, sometimes even that of the doctrinal message, this does not happen with other religions. They are usually pigeonholed into a more or less fixed pattern: origin/founder, holy books, doctrine/faith, and rituals. Often, the categories of sacred people, sacred places, and festivals are added. However, with regard more specifically to the subject of our research, i.e., the topic of social cohesion, it is noteworthy that some texts have dossiers that compare religions on the basis of different themes, many of which have an explicit connotation of positive contribution to society. For example, in the dossier attached to *Together on Mother Earth (Insieme sulla madre terra, Pesci and Trabucco 2024)*, titled precisely *The Great Themes in Religions (I grandi temi nelle religioni)*, there are sections devoted to the themes of hospitality and inclusion, the theme of nature and environmental protection, the theme of religious freedom, secularism, and democracy (pp. 74–119), the theme of human rights and interreligious dialogue (pp. 14–27), and the theme of society, economy, and social justice (pp. 160–72). A similar situation applies to the dossier *The Breath of Days. Religions Compared (Il respiro dei giorni. Religioni a confronto, Manganotti and Inciampo 2021)*, in which topics such as

“women in religions” (pp. 12–16), “peace in religions”, “justice in religions”, and “education in religions” (pp. 30–47) are covered. The dossier *The Us of Tomorrow. Religions in Dialogue* (*Noi domani. Religioni in dialogo*, Solinas 2022) compares religions on the basis of issues such as the environment (pp. 6–25) and social justice (pp. 26–49). Very often, ethical issues or those related to the dimensions of social cohesion are brought together with more straightforward theological themes. *Religion in the Classroom* (*Religione in aula*, Pace et al. 2014) deals with themes such as “different conceptions of God” (pp. 32–33) or of “the faithful” (pp. 112–13) along with topics such as freedom in religions, with reference also to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (pp. 72–73) or the theme of “duty”, with references both to religious precepts and to duty in a legislative or moral sense (pp. 302–3).

In addition to textbooks, I can cite further evidence of the representation of religions from this kind of “utilitarian” perspective of fostering positive or social cohesion effects. In another article of mine (Lapis 2024b), I analyzed the representation of Asian religions in TCR lessons by interviewing 27 upper secondary school teachers, taking into consideration also how they treat religion in general (p. 7). These data, too, confirm the tendency to frame all Asian religions (but not only) in the already mentioned patterns: origin/founder, holy books, doctrine/faith, and rituals. Not only that, but they also confirm the tendency to present religions (in this case, I have data only for Asian ones) as promoting positive values. Almost all of the teachers considered Asian religions to be inherently “green” (pp. 9–24), while one in particular praised Indian prisons where meditation programs would reduce inmate recidivism (p. 9).

From the perspective of the academic study of religion, such modes of representation present critical issues. The need to provide standardized outlines of other religions for comparison/dialogue with Christianity–Catholicism, as well as the need to set such comparison/dialogue on issues of relevance to social cohesion, results in an extremely essentialized, monolithic, and sometimes stereotyped representation of such traditions. Doctrines are foregrounded as if they represented the essence of religion, while all other elements are secondary and derivative. These doctrines, moreover, are treated a-historically and interpreted with a Christian-centric and modernist lens. For example, Buddhism is often presented exclusively in terms of the preaching of the historical Buddha Siddhartha Gautama (6th–5th cen. BCE), as if he were a counterpart/competitor of Jesus. As a result, the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path are mentioned as the whole doctrinal dimension of Buddhism, ignoring, for example, the developments and differentiations, including doctrinal ones, that have occurred in Buddhism throughout its history (cf. Faure 2009, pp. 7–10, 39–43). In addition, these doctrines are linked, more or less consistently, to contemporary themes. Taking the case of Buddhism and the topic of environmentalism again as an example, it is often argued that Buddhism preaches a (usually not very specified) interconnection between individuals and the natural environment and that it addresses the theme of desire as the cause of unsustainable consumerism (cf. e.g., *Together on Mother Earth. The Great Themes in Religions*, Pisci and Trabucco 2024, p. 89). It is, however, an essentialist and modernist reading, the unwanted results of which are the idealization of a religious tradition that often clashes with historical and empirical reality (Elverskog 2020); the depiction of such doctrines as valid in every historical and geographical context; and the representation of certain, cherry-picked, contemporary aspects as applicable to the entire empirical–historical variety of Buddhism. In fact, the above-mentioned *The Us of Tomorrow. Religions in Dialogue*, in order to provide actual examples of Buddhist environmental ethics and of Buddhist social justice, cannot but refer only to statements from the modern Buddhist movement Soka Gakkai or the 14th Dalai Lama (Solinas 2022, pp. 23, 47–48). On certain occasions, this tendency to view religions as moral-value resources creates poorly congruent juxtapositions: the above-cited *Cards on the Table*, in its

chapter on the theme of freedom, puts the aforementioned section on freedom from mafias together with a section on an Ecumenical Forum Against Modern Slavery and with a section on the doctrines of Buddhism because it preaches “liberation from desire” (Contadini and Frezzotti 2019, pp. 106–8).

Other problems concern the asymmetrical treatment between Christianity–Catholicism and other religions. In the case of the topic of women in religions, the aforementioned *The Breath of Days. Religions Compared* juxtaposes a rather positive presentation of the role of women in Christianity (Manganotti and Inciampo 2021, pp. 14–15) with a completely opposite depiction of that role in Hinduism, with emphasis on submission and violence (pp. 16–17). Here, the lack of historical–geographical contextualization and the emphasis on the doctrinal side stand out. While it is true that legislative codes inspired by Brahmanical orthodoxy in India have generally been characterized by caste discrimination and patriarchy, it is by no means certain that historical–geographical reality always collides with textual reality (Wagle 1998; Rigopoulos 2005, pp. 294–95). In general, the representation of other religions is asymmetrical by default because the only tradition whose evolution and historical contexts are also accounted for is Christianity–Catholicism. What is more, as is also to be expected, such a historical narrative is often set up with a Eurocentric, theological/teleological, and fundamentally positive perspective. In *The New: Come on, Let’s Go!*, after two chapters in which doctrinal and faith issues are addressed (Cristiani and Motto 2018, pp. 149–226), the chapter on the historical development of Christianity is titled precisely “The Truth of Christianity is Historicized”, in which, we must note, negative aspects such as those relating to the Holy Inquisition are not glossed over (pp. 262–68). However, the following chapters, focusing on the above-discussed contributions to social cohesion that Catholicism can offer to contemporary society, clearly present an irenic picture of the fulfillment of its true positive nature. I have also noted in some interviews that there is a latent attitude to emphasize the superiority of Christianity in comparison to other religions, such as the case of a lecturer addressing in class the question of whether or not Buddha was right in affirming the absence of the soul (Lapis 2024b, p. 11).

However, the comparison with other institutional religions is, in most cases, focused on the positive points they have in common. In contrast, a circumspect attitude is reserved for the new forms of religiosity, and often, a strong critical attitude is reserved for so-called “superstitious practices”. In fact, in curricula for technical and vocational upper-secondary schools, the ability to distinguish “religious practices from forms of fundamentalism, superstition, and esotericism” is set as an educational objective (TCRSCE 2012, pp. 6, 10, 14).<sup>23</sup> In textbooks, the reasons for this criticism vary from theological to moral and even rational grounds. For example, in *Religion in the Classroom*, superstition and magic are criticized as forms of irrationality that are inferior to the logic of religions and linked to ego-centric psychology. Concerning our topic at hand, it is noteworthy that some criticisms are also linked to worries about social cohesion. *The New: Come on, Let’s Go!* discusses the social relevance and possible dangerousness of sects since they are characterized by total control of the individual by the community and by the risks of collective suicide (Cristiani and Motto 2018, pp. 48–49). Similarly, *Heaven in Our Hands* describes the new religious movements as characterized by “blind and uncritical obedience, if not submission” (Bocchini and Fontanella 2023, p. 65). *ProvocACTIONS (ProvocAZIONI, Campoleoni et al. 2020)* implements a more theological and moral critique (pp. 115–19) but warns that new forms of religiosity can develop into Satanist sects, some of which “very often are also guilty of terrible criminal acts” (p. 117). *Heaven in Our Hands* explicitly points out “what is not religion” (Bocchini and Fontanella 2023, p. 40), referring to “sects and gurus” who deceive naïve people who are looking for answers.

In summary, the theme of social cohesion in TCR is explicitly present in its educational objectives. Through the knowledge of the history, the doctrine, and the ethical message of Christianity–Catholicism, the learner is expected to develop a number of positive skills and attitudes: a sense of belonging due to the common identity, both religious and cultural; an ability to dialogue with other religions through an engagement with the universal questions of man, and the related answers by Christianity; a sensitivity to issues closely related to Civic Education, such as the defense of human rights, the environment, legality, but presented *sub specie Catholicae religionis*, that is, emphasizing the Christian root of the concept of human rights or of the modern ethical values, and citing recent developments in Christianity in the field of social cohesion, especially ecological issues or interreligious dialogue. The latter aspect is greatly emphasized as a positive driver of social cohesion and is linked to the representation of other religions. They cannot be represented in textbooks or in class in the same detail as Christianity–Catholicism but must be represented in such a way as to allow comparison with what are called the key features of every religion (actually modeled on a monotheistic paradigm), such as founder, doctrine, holy book, rituals, festivals, etc. What is more, such dialogue/comparison between religions must also be in function to promote the above-mentioned positive attitudes in terms of civic education.

As a result, religions other than Christianity are represented in an ahistorical, monolithic, and distorted way through Christocentric categories. Further distortion is due to the need to find doctrinal references or messages that may be relevant to the promotion of environmental advocacy, peace, or religious freedom. This operation further emphasizes the doctrinal side at the expense of that of lived religion and risks presenting only a few carefully cherry-picked aspects (statements of certain leaders or movements) as being representative of the tradition as a whole. The representation of Christianity–Catholicism’s contribution to values of social cohesion is embedded in a historical narrative of development, which is positive from a representational perspective. However (even if it is not surprising), very often, this narrative follows an almost messianic teleology in which the Church’s past mistakes are now well surpassed by the positive contributions it makes to Italy and the contemporary world, sometimes even highlighted through a negative representation of other religions. However, these latter are sporadic cases. What is put instead in a bad light, also on the ground of worries for social cohesion, are the new religious movements and all those practices that are called “superstitious”.

## 6. Discussion

This article started discussing a number of supranational discourses in which education and knowledge of various religions are linked to expected positive outcomes in terms of social cohesion, which we framed as a working definition in the dimensions of (1) inclusion, (2) sense of belonging, (3) shared values, and (4) orientation toward the common good. We went on to analyze the presence of this theme of social cohesion and its effects in educational–didactic terms and the representation of religions in the REs of England, Japan, and Italy.

In the following comparative discussion of the data, I will draw inspiration from the methodology developed by Bråten (2013, 2016) to implement a comparison that helps us systematize the specificities of each examined nation in relation to the transnational theme of social cohesion that interests us. Bråten considers, in fact, the relationships between the global and the national as a framework for making comparisons between different RE systems. More specifically, she identifies three scales of processes that influence RE, namely supranational, national, and subnational (further divided into formal and informal types). These processes act on four levels: societal, i.e., the cultural, social, and political developments related to determining the characteristics of RE; institutional, i.e., the official

regulations regarding the contents and methods of RE; instructional, i.e., the actual implementation of official regulations; and the experiential level, i.e., what is actually learned by the learner.

Let us begin with the supranational scale. Our starting point, as we have seen, is the formal supranational process represented by specific supranational indications of educational policies, examined in Section 2. Informal supranational processes, on the other hand, are those that “go on in and through the formal processes but also outside them and in part independently of them, such as secularization, pluralization and globalization” (Bråten 2016, p. 38). In our case, we can identify a specific aspect of the globalization process, namely that related to the increase in tensions and fears about the clash of civilizations, further exacerbated since 9/11.

I want to anticipate here that we must consider another informal supranational process, of longer duration but still very relevant to our discussion. This is the influence of the modern concept of religion, typically of Protestant genealogy (Smith 1998; Nongbri 2013, p. 85ff), which has taken various forms. Among the most influential is the so-called World Religion Paradigm (WRP), which I will briefly explain later in this section.

These formal and informal supranational processes we have just mentioned pertain to the societal level (cultural, social, and political), which in turn acquires a specific “national style” (Bråten 2013, pp. 198–202) depending on the country in which they are received.

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify one thing. As will have been understood from the previous analysis, we have focused on the societal level, the institutional level, and an intermediate level between institutional and instructional, namely the representation of religions in curricula and textbooks (with some additional data on teachers’ work in the Italian case). The instructional level of actual teaching practice and the experiential level of actual learning would require extensive ethnographic methods not possible in this study. However, we can infer reasonable hypotheses to be confirmed in subsequent studies.

Let us start with the societal level. We have seen that in England, there has been an almost perfect reflection on a national scale of supranational recommendations and their consideration of the religious element as central in educational policies aimed at avoiding cultural clash or, in the case of England, aimed at promoting community cohesion in an increasingly culturally differentiated country. There is a strong idea of promoting an exchange of opinions, sometimes even polemical, between people of different backgrounds in order to find shared values. The coincidence between supranational and national processes can be explained by the fact that, if the events of 9/11 were a trigger from a supranational point of view, the attacks in England on 7 July 2005 were the national trigger.

While at the societal level in England, there is greater attention to managing differences, in Japan, on the other hand, concerns and debates related to RE focus more on managing “sameness”. That is, Japanese RE should provide very specific philosophical–moral guidelines so that the student’s personality develops along lines deemed as socially positive. We have also seen how an emphasis on specific socio-cultural affiliations, namely being Japanese or “Oriental” (as opposed to being Western), is not absent. This affiliation can also be evoked with almost religious nuances, as we have seen in relation to debates on education in religious sentiment. Finally, as proof of the interest in social cohesion in the name of homogeneity, there is a strong tendency to assign RE the function of dissuading from undertaking religious practices deemed potentially harmful, such as those of the numerous new religious movements in Japan. This tendency is exacerbated by traumatic events that, unlike the English case, consider Japanese social cohesion at risk from “endogenous” rather than “exogenous” causes such as increased cultural or religious differences.

In Italy, the societal level is closely linked to the confessional character of its RE and, consequently, to the role of the Catholic Church in Italian society and politics. We have

seen that the TCR, with the revision of the concordat in 1984 in the face of growing religious and cultural pluralism, has gone from being catechetical indoctrination to teaching defined as “cultural” but still in accordance with church doctrine. The supranational and national debates on the importance of intercultural and interreligious dialogue have led the Italian Episcopal Conference to emphasize the role of TCR as education toward religiosity *tout court*, and, therefore, as education towards other religions as well. We must also consider the theological context, in which other religions are considered parts of the same Christian revelation. In the case of Italy, we do not have traumatic events of particular relevance to RE.

How does this translate on the institutional level?

Regarding England, we have seen the indications according to which RE should not offer mere knowledge of different religions but develop through confrontation and exchange of views regarding religions, even on a personal level. This serves to find potential shared values and possible insights that can be beneficial for society at large. Not only from a social or moral point of view but also regarding, for example, environmental protection. In other words, an orientation toward a common good starting from the doctrinal and moral elements of religions. For example, the indication for pupils to create a “recipe for living happily together” (RECEW 2013, p. 20) inspired by various religions. There are several institutional characteristics that favor this: the fact that it is a timetabled compulsory subject, non-confessional (actually multi-confessional and with the possibility of opt-out), and the fact that among the general missions of the school, there is also the “spiritual, moral, social and cultural development” (Ofsted 2004, p. 6) of pupils. There is also the configuration of English RE in which curricula are decided locally and a lively academic and methodological debate. This means that some proposals are particularly focused on a type of RE centered on personal confrontation, even polemical, regarding the theological and moral proposals of various religions. This is the case of Barnes (2014) and Wright et al. (2019). This occurs not only with a view to averting possible radicalist drifts and, therefore, threats to social cohesion but also responds to the idea that a sense of belonging can arise from the active involvement of students, even on potentially controversial issues.

In Japan, the institutional context is rigorously non-confessional, and RE is spread across other subjects, particularly in ethics (*rinri*). The educational objective of this subject is to promote the existential, moral, and social development of the pupil through confrontation with the “broad intellectual accumulation from all the world, past and present” (MEXT 2018, p. 88), which indifferently includes religious traditions, the philosophies of specific thinkers, or generic introductions to certain concepts. It should be remembered that the Japanese educational system is highly centralized, and textbooks must demonstrate compliance with guidelines to be authorized. These guidelines focus particularly on those aspects of religions relevant to the social cohesion dimensions of inclusion and orientation towards the common good, such as the idea of unconditional love in Christianity or compassion for every form of life in Buddhism. Moreover, there is a notable presence of the dimensions of shared values and sense of belonging with a particular nationalist-culturalist nuance: various Japanese intellectual resources, very often linked to religious traditions, tend to be presented as an immutable substrate from which a specificity of Japanese culture derives. This idea of social cohesion based on sameness also resonates with concerns about deviations from ordinary religious organizations, as in the case of new religious movements.

In Italy, the institutional framework is quite different, with a confessional and optional RE. However, the guidelines manage to combine—in a way not dissimilar to the other two case studies—the dimensions of inclusion (especially of religious/cultural alterities), the sense of belonging towards Christianity and related shared values, and ori-

entation towards the common good. They do so through the following reasoning: there is a common basis of religiosity formed by the “universal questions of man” (TCRSCE 2012, pp. 2, 6, 10, 11, 13). Addressing them through Christianity allows the development of existential and moral sensitivities that, in turn, help openness to religious and cultural diversity (inclusion). Moreover, there is the assumption that many of the modern Italian and European values, including those related to social and environmental sustainability, have their roots in Christianity (sense of belonging and shared values). Given that other religions, in dialogue with Christianity, can also offer moral, existential, or theological insights in line with such modern values, TCR wants to carve out a role as a promoter of shared values and orientation towards the common good, even towards members of other religions or non-practitioners, who can indeed participate in the lessons. This attitude of inclusivity, however, often fails when it comes to unorthodox forms of religiosity, such as new age, new religious movements, and practices defined as “superstitious”. Sometimes, the illegitimacy of such forms of religiosity is justified by their potential threat to social cohesion.

We have seen so far how the supranational theme of social cohesion (and related concerns) has been translated with its own national style in different cases, with variations due both to the social, cultural, and political context and to the specific institutional configuration of RE. However, common points can already be seen starting from the institutional level. I am talking in particular about a “utilitarian” approach to religion: through the study of religion, and in particular of some specific doctrinal aspects, not only are there expected fewer social frictions due to prejudices or fears due to ignorance, but also proactively positive attitudes, inspired by the messages of the religions themselves, are supposed to be nurtured. Another common element is the fact that personal involvement is required from the learner, albeit with different educational nuances. In the English case, the active involvement of the learner is aimed at cultivating an attitude of sharing opinions and values, but also an attitude of criticism. In the Japanese case, the doctrines of religions are treated like schools of philosophical thought, as “bricks” with which the student can build their own vision of themselves and the world. In the Italian case, instead, the learner is asked to implement a religious sensitivity, opening up to universal human questions, a sort of common religious language to be able to dialogue successfully and share positive values with other religious positions.

The interesting fact is the consequence of the representation of religions. To be functional for the educational purposes discussed above, religions in all three cases are represented through the above-mentioned World Religion Paradigm, which thus proves to be a rather influential informal process. This paradigm represents religions as internally homogeneous and coherent phenomena as if they were individual actors, easily identifiable and distinguishable, especially on the basis of their doctrines, but easily comparable to each other on the basis of a Christian scheme, especially modern and Protestant. The WRP privileges beliefs from which all other characteristics (rituality, morality, social structures, etc.) coherently derive and often portrays practitioners as blindly adhering to the orthodoxy and orthopraxy indicated by their respective religious elites of reference without considering variations over the course of history, geography, or within the same groups and subgroups of practitioners (Masuzawa 2005; Cotter and Robertson 2016). Another consequence of this paradigm is the persistence of the stereotype of religion as essentially a moral issue (Eyl 2017).

We have seen this tendency in English RE with a “fundamentalist” representation of the five Buddhist precepts. These essentialist and monolithic representations are further reinforced by an educational–didactic approach of “learning from religion” (Engebretson 2006), according to which the learner must be subjectively involved and must respond per-

sonally to the doctrines of the religions studied. These doctrines, moreover, are presented in the function of this or that social issue, thus risking emphasizing only the elements functional to the problem in question. We have seen, for example, the case of Japan, with the representation of Christianity as a religion of “love for one’s neighbor”. A further consequence of this approach is that religions are attributed a certain essential core, deemed fundamentally positive and therefore worthy of being internalized by the learner, thus risking constructing a dichotomy between true/good religion and false/bad religion (Jensen et al. 2018, pp. 8–9), as we have seen in the cases of Italy and Japan.

In this regard, it is interesting to note a certain convergence in the negative attitude towards religious practices perceived as unorthodox, despite the strong differences at the societal and institutional level between the two contexts: absence versus presence of traumatic events relevant to RE and confessional versus non-confessional configuration. A possible explanation could be found in the fact that in both cases, there is an assumption of what the “shared values” should be or which degree of homogeneity of the social fabric is aimed for. In Japan, there is a notable tendency to exercise moral control over students and to favor a sense of specific cultural homogeneity; in Italy, there is the (theological) idea that fundamentally all religions “often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men” (Paul VI 1965, §2), and therefore what differs from a Christocentric paradigm (very similar to the WRP) of religion, which is considered a fundamentally positive phenomenon, is no longer definable as true religion.

## 7. Conclusions

This article has analyzed how supranational debates and guidelines related to the theme of social cohesion and education about religions have been interpreted and translated into educational policies within three different national contexts: England, Japan, and Italy. To coherently analyze the theme of social cohesion, a working definition was chosen that includes the dimensions of (1) inclusion, (2) sense of belonging, (3) shared values, and (4) orientation to the common good.

After examining how the theme of social cohesion in relation to education about religions has been articulated at the supranational level, elements related to the four dimensions were analyzed for each of the three contexts, both in relation to the general sociopolitical context and to the more specific, institutional, and operational context for RE. The consequences of the representation of religions were also analyzed.

A comparative analysis of the three case studies was then carried out using a methodology that takes into account the interactions between supranational and national processes and the consequences at the societal, institutional, and (to a lesser extent) instructional levels. From this analysis, it was understood that, despite the theme of social cohesion taking on a specific national style at the societal level and despite differences in the institutional configuration of RE, commonalities are found. A certain political and “instrumental” character of religious education is noted. There is a tendency to address the complex socio-cultural phenomena of religions as tools in the service of social cohesion policies. The cultural influence of the WRP justifies and reinforces this tendency.

The concrete consequences at the instructional level of actual teaching practice and the experiential level of actual learning would require extensive ethnographic methods not possible in this study. However, based on the ways religions are represented in guidelines and textbooks, and along with some additional data on actual teaching practice (limited to the Italian case), we can infer that the quality of teaching is problematic by the standards of the academic study of religion, as it does not adequately consider the complexity of the religious phenomenon, reiterates Eurocentric biases, and fails to promote the necessary analytical–critical skills (cf. Kjeldsen 2019).

These criticisms of the educational–didactic consequences in the three examined contexts also resonate with other criticisms raised by other studies of religions-based RE scholars against the supranational indications illustrated in Section 2. For example, Jensen (2008, pp. 123–37; 2017, pp. 55–58) laments that the idea of “problem-solving RE” centered on intercultural and interreligious dialogue risks focusing too much on the goal of “learning from religion” and on the conception of religion as a “special”, “sensitive” and “personal matter”, with the risk of preventing a balanced handling of religious topics in RE classes. And indeed, this is a hypothesis also supported by the present article.

While some proponents of RE based on the academic study of religion are skeptical about assigning RE the priority role of promoting desirable social attitudes (e.g., Jensen 2008, p. 131), this is not to say that such a type of RE cannot contribute to these ends (Kjeldsen 2019, p. 18) and provide at the same time an objective and comprehensive representation of religions in line with the results of the academic study of them. The point is aiming to learn not “from religions” but “from the academic study of religion” (Alberts 2008, p. 320; Jensen 2019, pp. 45–47); those knowledge and skills potentially functional to the desired educational objectives. As I have tried to argue in relation to the teaching of East Asian religions (Lapis 2023, pp. 263–320; 2024a), it is possible to combine the epistemological principles of the academic study of religion with the principles and goals of civic and intercultural education—in this case, those suggested by the Council of Europe through its *Framework of Competences for Democratic Cultures* (CoE 2018).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> UK Parliament, Education Reform Act 1988, Sections 8.3 and 84.8.

<sup>2</sup> The approaches to RE of these influential and prolific authors are analyzed and discussed from the point of view of the study of religion in Alberts (2007, pp. 162–73) and Lapis (2023, pp. 201–16).

<sup>3</sup> This section mentions person names according to Japanese custom, with the surname preceding the first name.

<sup>4</sup> <https://laws.e-gov.go.jp/law/321CONSTITUTION> (accessed on 9 November 2024). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Japanese and Italian are my own.

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/kihon/about/a001.htm](https://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/kihon/about/a001.htm) (accessed on 9 November 2024).

<sup>6</sup> The use of the term *shūkyōteki jōsō* dates even back to pre-U.S. Occupation Japan, but because it is related to a different context, we will not dwell on it further. For further details cf. Tsuchiya (2008, pp. 1–3).

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/shingi/chuuou/toushin/661001.htm](https://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chuuou/toushin/661001.htm) (accessed on 7 November 2024).

<sup>8</sup> More details on this topic of the uniqueness of Japanese culture *infra* in this section.

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/kihon/about/mext\\_00003.html](https://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/kihon/about/mext_00003.html) (accessed on 11 November 2024).

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/kihon/discussion/07011611.pdf](https://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/kihon/discussion/07011611.pdf) (accessed on 11 November 2024), p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> Approximately every ten years school curricula undergo a review, see [https://www.mext.go.jp/a\\_menu/shotou/new-cs/idea/index.htm](https://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/new-cs/idea/index.htm) (accessed on 14 October 2024).

<sup>12</sup> I assume the text refers to the islamic pillar of *zakāt*.

<sup>13</sup> Fujiwara analyzes manuals that refer to curriculum whose last revision dated to 1999, which I have been unable to retrieve. However, comparing the version prior to the current one (2009) ([https://www.mext.go.jp/component/a\\_menu/education/micro\\_detail/\\_icsFiles/afieldfile/2014/10/01/1282000\\_4.pdf](https://www.mext.go.jp/component/a_menu/education/micro_detail/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2014/10/01/1282000_4.pdf), accessed on 14 October 2004) and the current curriculum with the results of Fujiwara’s analysis, there have been no major changes in the way religions are represented.

<sup>14</sup> This is a site run by national broadcaster NHK that offers audio and video lessons for all school subjects, updated periodically according to ministerial guidelines. The lesson in question can be found at [https://www2.nhk.or.jp/kokokoza/watch/?das\\_id=D0022130091\\_00000](https://www2.nhk.or.jp/kokokoza/watch/?das_id=D0022130091_00000) (accessed on 28 September 2024).

- 15 A discussion of this religious movement, its practices, often the source of much controversy, and relations with the Japanese political establishment are beyond the scope of this article. See, e.g., [Introvigne \(2000\)](#) and [Serçen Nurcan and Doğrul \(2022\)](#).
- 16 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hn66JghRlB8> (accessed on 30 September 2024).
- 17 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOgaeULYJFQ> (accessed on 30 September 2024), 2:32–3:40.
- 18 Ib. 3:59–4:41.
- 19 Cf. also ib. 2:15–2:29.
- 20 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hn66JghRlB8> (accessed on 30 September 2024), 0:13–0:33.
- 21 <https://blog.uaar.it/2020/12/14/educazione-civica-terreno-conquista-degli-insegnanti-religione/> (accessed on 7 October 2024).
- 22 A list is available at <https://irc.chiesacattolica.it/rubriche/libri-di-testo-adottabili/> (accessed on 16 November 2024). However, *Heaven in Our Hands (Il cielo tra le mani, Bocchini and Fontanella 2023)* seems omitted, but this is clearly due to inattention as I have personally examined this textbook at the National Office for TCR in November 2023.
- 23 I cannot explain the lack of such an indication in the curricula for the classic, scientific, linguistic, and socio-pedagogic Lyceum. A suspicious interpretation would read here a negative bias towards students of technical or vocational upper-secondary schools for being more naïve.

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