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Teaching Asian Religions through the Internet—How Online Representations Interact with Dynamics of Eurocentrism, Orientalism, and Confessionalism in the Case of Italian Teaching of Catholic Religion

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Abstract: The religions of South and East Asia resist Eurocentric interpretations, such as the so-called World Religion Paradigm. However, they are subjected in various ways to hetero- and auto-orientalist representations that respond to Western ideals and expectations. This article analyzes how Italian Catholic teachers use online representations of East Asian religions in their lessons to teach these traditions. The aim is to shed light on the interplay, facilitated by online environments, between contemporary processes of Eurocentric and Orientalist interpretation and the educational and confessional motivations of confessional religious education teachers. The result of the analysis indicates that these factors concur to reinforce misleading representations, which contradicts the intercultural aims proclaimed by teachers and other Teaching of Catholic Religion stakeholders. Nevertheless, this article also individuates those elements that could be fruitfully framed in an academic study-of-religions perspective and suggests a modality of cooperation between Catholic Religion teachers and scholars of religions.

Keywords: confessional religious education; East Asian religions; orientalism; online representations of religions; misrepresentations; critical study of religions

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1. Introduction

The topic of South and East Asian religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Shinto, etc., henceforth only "Asian religions") presents a challenging and seemingly contradictory character: on the one hand, these are religious phenomena that resist Eurocentric paradigms of religion, such as that of the Word Religions; on the other hand, they have long been the object of orientalist representations made by both external agents and insider innovators, thereby shaping the hetero- and self-understanding of Asian religions according to Euro–American-centric ideas, values, and expectations (King 1999; Josephson 2015; Turner and Salemink 2015; Paramore 2016).

These processes are in turn embedded in the dynamics of globalization, which speed up their dissemination and re-elaboration (Robertson 1992; Appadurai 1996; Borup and Fibiger 2017). Particular consideration should be given to the Internet dimension. On the one hand, there is extreme freedom of creation and interpretation, even in relation to religion (Campbell and Teusner 2015). On the other hand, there are those dynamics called "echo chambers" where, especially within social media, certain representations and interpretations tend to polarize and strengthen due to the confirmation bias of users. This process is fueled by social media algorithms that continuously provide the same information as expected by the users or propose scandalous and divisive content (Quattrociocchi 2017; Rieder et al. 2018). Nevertheless, the Internet and especially social media, such as YouTube, are increasingly being used as sources of information and learning, even in learning and teaching contexts (Balkin and Sonneved 2016; Pattier 2021).

The picture becomes even more complicated if we consider another factor and another social dimension: the teaching of religions in state schools. In Europe, a large part of school teaching on religion is confessional, and the creation of curricula, the training and qualification of teachers, and their management are under the responsibility of one or more religious traditions through agreements with the various States (Davis and Miroshnikova 2013). These teachings, notwithstanding their confessional focus, prompted by supranational debates and discourses on the importance of interreligious and intercultural dialogue (OSCE/ODIHR 2007; Keats 2007; Jackson 2014), are gradually embracing these objectives[1].

In this context, this article takes, as a case study, the confessional Teaching of Catholic Religion (TCR) in Italian state schools and analyzes the ways in which representations of Asian religions, especially those conveyed by the Internet, are used by teachers to address these traditions in their lessons. The aim is to shed light on the interaction between the aforementioned processes of Eurocentric and orientalist interpretation and the educational and confessional motivations of TCR. The result of this interaction, it will be argued, is the reinforcement of orientalist, Eurocentric, and confessional perspectives that prevent an integral and balanced understanding of Asian religions, in contradiction with the goals of knowledge of other religions and intercultural dialogue declared by TCR itself.

This article wishes to contribute, first of all, to the scholarly discussion, especially in the European context, on Religious Education (RE) from the perspective of the academic study of religion (Alberts 2007, 2019; Jensen 2017; Kjeldsen 2019), touching on aspects that have been sporadically addressed so far, namely that of the representation of Asian religions in RE (Cush and Backus 2008; Nyborg 2017; Fujiwara 2019) and a more general reflection on RE starting from the theme of Asian Religions in order to highlight the presence of Eurocentric factors and biases (Cush and Robinson 2020; Lapis 2023). However, the case of Italy has never been considered, nor has the topic of the online representations of religions been explored.

This article also wants to contribute to the long-established scholarship on how Asian religions have been reinterpreted, represented, and reworked in the Global North, in religious and non-religious settings (e.g., Clarke 1997; Squarcini 2007; Palmer and Siegler 2017; Borup and Fibiger 2017), adding relevant contexts still little explored, such as the online one (Ugoretz 2022), or ignored, such as that of teaching–learning.

What follows will first offer more details on what was mentioned in this introduction. I will discuss how the subject of Asian religions presents features that undermine its understanding if approached from a Eurocentric perspective that is insufficiently self-critical and not informed by the academic study of religion. Next, the context of the case study analysis, namely the TCR, will be illustrated. After a quick historical examination of its development from catechetical teaching to a "Catholic history of religions" with a proclivity for interreligious dialogue, the data sample, its collection, and analysis methodology will be presented. We will then move on to the discussion of the results, showing the interaction between the contents of the online resources used by teachers and their motivations and ways of using them, focusing on the influence of a Eurocentric conception of religion, orientalist interpretations, and theological motivations.

In the conclusions, the results will be briefly summarized and some brief reflections and proposals on how to set up a possible dialogue between the academic study of Asian religions and TCR teachers will be offered, in light of the fact that certain resources used, teaching practices implemented, or attitudes demonstrated by teachers can potentially lead to a non-distorted understanding of Asian religions, if put in the right frame.

2. The Challenges of Asian Religions

The theme of Asian religions features three intertwined epistemological, historical, and socio-cultural challenges that may hinder an objective and nuanced teaching and learning in the classroom situation (and beyond). The first concerns the resistance of many Asian religious phenomena to a Protestant-based conception of religion; the second concerns the deep influence of modernity and colonialism in both the self- and hetero-representations of

Asian religions; and the third concerns the contemporary role of global social, cultural, and economic tendencies in the interpretation and practice of Asian religions.

The first challenge relates to the so-called World Religion Paradigm (WRP) (Masuzawa 2005; Cotter and Robertson 2016). From the 19th century onwards, under the influence of a Protestant understanding, religions have been primarily conceived as coherent wholes, different and separate from each other, whose adherents are expected to entertain an exclusive affiliation. The fundamental elements are individuated in defined sets of beliefs and moral norms (possibly proclaimed by a founder), clearly encoded in sacred texts, which are objects of faith and of rational debate. Rituals are often deemed of secondary importance, as they are simply the means through which the faithful express their beliefs and/or the fundamental 'religious experience' underpinning them. Rituals take place in times and places that are rigidly separated (i.e., 'sacred') from all the other dimensions of human behavior (King 2011; Stoddard and Martin 2017).

Asian religions provide plenty of examples that challenge this paradigm. Not infrequently, lay practitioners in contemporary China and Japan address or practice more religious traditions, that is, Buddhism, Daoism, Shintoism, or local traditions (even Christianity) without any concern of exclusive belonging or incompatibility of beliefs. Instead, the differentiating factors are the modalities of practices (ritual, communal, cultivational, scriptural, and immediate–practical), which nonetheless cut across different traditions (Kisala 2006; Chau 2011; LeFebvre 2015; See also statistics in Roemer 2012; Yang 2018). In Japan, the cases of Buddhism and Shintoism show the absence of discreteness between traditions. Not only has Buddhism historically incorporated the local *kami* deities of Japan both doctrinally and ritually, but also Shintoism actually developed as a self-conscious tradition from the 16th century onwards through its interaction with Buddhism (Breen and Teeuwen 2010; Teeuwen and Rambelli 2003). Confucianism further complicates the picture, as its overlapping of ethical, political, philosophical, and religious spheres has caused many disputes about whether, from a Western and modern perspective, it is a religion or not (Sun 2013).

A similar discourse applies to Hinduism. Scholars tried to identify the main traits of Hinduism. Flood (2003) indicated "shared ritual patterns, a shared revelation, a belief in reincarnation (*saṃsāra*), liberation (*mokṣa*), and a particular form of endogamous social organization or caste". However, these traits are fuzzy and problematic, as Hinduism "contains both uniting and dispersing tendencies" (p. 4). While the centrality of Veda's revelation may be distinctive, theological confrontations among and within the six orthodox *darśana*, or the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava traditions, disputed very different metaphysical positions (Clooney 2003). Other foundational ideas, such as *karma*, *dharma*, and a cosmology centered on Mount Meru, resonate with those of Buddhism and Jainism (Doniger 2009, p. 39). Doniger also observed that the "uniting and dispersing tendencies" do not necessarily translate into polarized groups of people: "a single person would often have both halves (as well as non-Hindu traditions) in his or her head" (p. 44).

The varied yet consistent array of phenomena classified as "tantrism" or "esotericism" are a widely shared Asian body of beliefs and practices, mostly related to Hinduism and Buddhism, but also intersecting with Daoism and Shintoism. This religiosity strongly emphasizes ritual actions and the role of the body in manipulating the cosmos for soteriological, political, and mundane aims, thus challenging an inward, mind-centered approach to religion (Orzech et al. 2011; D. G. White 2000). Some may object that present-day religious phenomena are not so challenging to the commonsense notion of religion or, conversely, that the original form of traditions, such as Buddhism, was devoid of any 'superstitions'. Historical and ethnographic evidence points to the contrary: early Buddhism featured beliefs and practices relative to 'demons' or *genii loci* called *yakkha* (DeCaroli 2004); similarly, to practice religion to gain mundane benefits (Jp. *genze riyaku*) is a cross-cutting feature of contemporary Japanese religiosity (Reader and Tanabe 1998).

This is not to completely deny elements appealing to Euro–American tastes, such as the disenchanted ideal of a Zen monk in meditation or the philosophical allure of certain

Daoist or Buddhist texts. The point is that such elements have been forcibly emphasized by the impact of the modern and European idea of religion in Asian regions.

This brings us to the second challenge, that is, the processes of orientalistic hetero- and self-representations of Asian traditions subjected to colonial control or influence. Religions other than Christianity were interpreted, ranked, and evaluated based on the above-mentioned WRP (Cotter and Robertson 2016; Smith 1998). For example, in their attempt to understand the 'religion of India', colonizers looked at Brahmins and Muslim law doctors, that is, conservative religious specialists whose approaches were closer to Westerners' preconceived idea of religion based on elite-written texts and on the separation between Islam and the 'religion of India'. This came at the expense of other texts, such as the Purāṇa, ritual expressions or mutual borrowings between Islamic and Hindū traditions, classified as spurious texts, superstitious practices, or contaminations. At the same time, modern ideas, such as the universality of religion and of religious experience, the rejection of the ritual dimension, and the emphasis on creedal belief and rational interpretation of texts, started spreading among locals. In this way, the term and idea of "Hinduism" gradually developed and entered the public sphere (Bloch et al. 2010). Similarly, in Europe, the interpretation of Buddhism shifted from 'pagan superstition' to a religion on par with Christianity due to the positive interpretation of Siddhartha Gautama as the founder of an ethical–philosophical system, or even of an 'atheistic religion', which only later became corrupted by superstitious practices. The idea of the historical Buddha as a philosopher or 'Luther of India', whose original teaching was fundamentally rational and ethical, was well received by the Victorian sensibilities of Europe in the second half of the 19th century (Almond 1988; Masuzawa 2005).

We see other similar processes in 19th and early 20th China and Japan, under the general urgency of modernization in order to avoid colonial conquest. In Republican and Communist China, the influence of a modern idea of religion brought about the recognition of five religions (Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism), while all the other religious expressions (the so-called Chinese folk religion) have been (and in some ways still are) banned as superstitions (*mixin*) (Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Tarocco 2008). The same occurred in Japan, where the idea of religion as a private matter concerned with morals and emotional or philosophical issues strongly influenced Buddhist schools, which reorganized themselves under the banner of Shinbukkyō ("New Buddhism"). Their agenda was to go beyond sectarian divisions and to emphasize common elements and articulate them in accordance with modern views: rationalism, the rejection of ritualism, an emphasis on morality and inner experience, the convergence with science, and so on (Isomae 2012; Josephson 2012).

A pivotal role was played by the local religious élite, educated in modern European standards, perceptive toward these ideas about religion, especially in nationalistic terms. Reformers such as Vivekānanda (1863–1902), Dharmapāla (1864–1933), Shaku Sōen (1860–1919), Taixu (1890–1947), and Suzuki Daisetsu (1870–1966) (King 1999; Lopez 2008; Rigopoulos 2019; Sharf 1993; Snodgrass 2003) were quite active in promoting their traditions to Western audiences, such as in the 1893 World Parliament of Religions, through two strategies of self-orientalism. On the one hand, Eastern traditions were represented as the 'other' in terms of nonrationality, of being beyond words and ungraspable by the materialistic mind of the Westerner. On the other hand, they flipped over the Western critique of backwardness. They emphasized how their religions were 'more modern' than their Western counterparts by highlighting the role of the individual religious experience cultivated through meditation, by stressing the universality of such experience, and by rationally interpreting carefully cherry-picked texts.

These historical processes lead us to the third challenge, namely, the development and dissemination of certain interpretations of Asian religions, which further articulated the above-discussed representation to better fit the socio-cultural contexts of America and Europe. According to Gauthier (2020), contemporary religiosity is increasingly being influenced by the values and ideologies of neoliberalism and consumerism, more specifically by

the two imperatives of "utilitarian individualism" and "expressive individualism". The former emphasizes values such as self-realization, constant improvement, overcoming obstacles, and so forth. The latter fuels a constant need for ideas, imaginary, and objects to continuously recreate and bestow "authenticity" to one's own identity and lifestyle.

Gauthier's theory is quite useful regarding the contemporary development of Asian religions in Euro–American regions, especially when they are emphasized as being 'freer', 'more holistic', and 'up to date' than the mainstream monotheisms. Indeed, Altglas (2014) argued that Westerners are drawn to contemporary Hindū traditions not only out of exoticism, but because they see in them functional answers to the imperatives of being positive, of managing stress and anxiety, and of striving for sensations of self-realization. Palmer and Siegler (2017) observed how popular Western interpretations of Daoism offer remedies against social atomization with ideas such as interconnectedness with the whole cosmos. They still maintain a strong individualist component because they require no adhesion to a specific dogma or institutional membership. Furthermore, Daoist ideas and practices concerning gymnastics, dietary provisions, and meditation fit well with the demand for emotional peak experiences, wellness, and self-authentication. *Mindfulness-based stress reduction therapy* shows how certain Buddhist meditative practices have been abstracted and rationalized into a supposedly nonreligious protocol for psychological health aimed at coping with the pressure of contemporary neoliberal competitive society (Braun 2017). Irizarry (2015) identified various contemporary everyday uses of the word "Zen" which well exemplify the themes of individual religiosity (keywords: "spirituality", "New Age", and "mysticism"), of individual utilitarianism (keywords: "cutting edge", "energetic", "inspirational", "focused", and "in control"), of expressive individualism (keywords: "creative", "outside-the-box", "cool", and "sophisticated"), and of well-being (keywords: "relaxing", "harmonious", "natural", and "peaceful").

Re-interpretations and re-elaborations are further facilitated by the increased role of the Internet. A case in point is the creation of online communities of non-Japanese Shintō practitioners. Here, the theme of expressive individualism interacts with the theme of contemporary ecological lifestyles[2], as these communities tend to interpret Shintō as an environmentally friendly religion, inspired also by other media, such as Miyazaki's animation films (Ogihara-Schuck 2014; Rots 2015; Baffelli and Ugoretz 2021). More generally, the theme of ecology is a relevant part of positive orientalist interpretations of East Asian religions, especially since the publication of Lynn White's seminal paper, "The historical roots of our present ecological crisis" (L. White 1967). Here, Christianity and its anthropocentrism were interpreted and criticized as a factor behind the environmental crisis, a move that paved the way to the opposite interpretation of non-Western religions as inherently eco-friendly (Kalland 2003).

3. Introduction to the Case Study of the Teaching of Catholic Religion (TCR): Context and Methodology

Historians tend to identify the 1929 Lateran Pacts between the Fascist regime and the Holy See as the moment in which the first configuration of TCR was formulated. In this context, the Concordat signed by the two parties explicitly provided for a catechetical instruction, imparted according to the educational dictates of the Catholic Church, and defined as "the foundation and capstone of the public education" (Giorda and Saggioro 2011, p. 35).

In the immediate post-war period, TCR continued to be a catechetical subject, but in the 1960s and 1970s, debates arose on whether this subject may be modified in the light of the emerging cultural and religious pluralism, including proposals such as the addition of a non-confessional course on religious culture. As a result, in the 1984 revision of the Concordat, the 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. According to canon 804 of the Code of Canon Law, it is the diocesan ordinary (i.e., the local bishop) who determines the suitability of teachers and must supervise them, checking their orthodox understanding of Catholic doctrine, the conformity of their lifestyle with Catholic doctrine, and their pedagogical skills. With regard to training, according to the most recent agreement between the Italian Republic and the Italian Episcopal Conference (Presidential Decree no. 175 of 20/8/2012), nursery and primary school teachers may be ordinary teachers, but they must be approved by the Church, or they may be lay people, deacons, or priests holding a diploma from an institute of religious studies recognized by the Church. Secondary school teachers must have one of the following: (a) a degree (baccalaureate, licentiate, or doctorate) in theology or other ecclesiastical disciplines; (b) a certificate of completion of a regular course of theological studies in a major seminary; or (c) a master's degree in religious sciences issued by an institute recognized by the Church.

The TCR curricula currently in force are those promulgated in 2010 (nursery and primary) and 2012 (high school) by a joint agreement between the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research, and the Italian Episcopal Conference. The sample of teachers interviewed came from secondary schools, and the relative curriculum has three main objectives: (1) To contribute to an overall formation of the pupil, in a personal, existential, and moral sense. This objective is explicitly based on the assumption that there are universal questions of meaning and moral issues underlying the development of every individual; (2) To transmit and preserve Catholicism as a national cultural heritage; and (3) To transmit and preserve Christianity as a seminal element of the history and culture of Europe and the world. The documents define three main areas of teaching. The main one is the 'Biblical–theological' area, in which the confessional character of TCR is emphasized and texts, dogmas, and doctrines are addressed according to Catholic orthodoxy. This area also provides the central frame of reference for the contents addressed in the other two areas. The "anthropological–existential" area addresses topics such as the (supposed) universality of fundamental questions like the origin of the world and of humanity, the meaning of life and death, existential, moral, and social questions, such as adolescence, forgiveness, or freedom of conscience. These questions are addressed by giving priority to Christian–Catholic answers, but inputs from other religions can be also provided without providing further indications as to which or how many traditions. The theme of other religions is also found in the third area, defined as "historical–phenomenological". It is dedicated primarily to the historical development and cultural influences of Christianity and Catholicism in the history of Europe and Italy, but it has increasingly also included content on other religions, often with a comparative approach, in order to identify common elements and peculiarities of Christianity/Catholicism (Presidential Decree no. 176 of 20/8/2012; Giorda and Saggioro 2011; Kjeldsen and Jensen 2014b).

As noted in the introduction in relation to confessional RE in general, also in TCR, there has been growing attention in recent years to the issues of pluralism and interreligious/intercultural dialogue. The *Letter to Teachers of the Catholic Religion* of the Episcopal Commission for Catholic Education, Schools and Universities of the Italian Episcopal Conference pushes toward an enhancement of the study of other cultures and religions, given the increasing cultural and religious plurality in Italy (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; Moscato 2020; Caputo and Rompianesi 2020; 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).

The primary data this article is based on are drawn from (1) interviews with Catholic high school teachers on how they teach Asian religions and (2) an analysis of the online resources they use. I contacted teachers through the institutional TCR offices present in each

diocese (roughly corresponding to the territorial division by province). I sent a request to these offices to forward my interview request, which included my profile, research objective, and interview topics, to their affiliated teachers. The response was very diverse, from TCR offices that explicitly refused or did not respond to offices that were enthusiastic about the proposal. A total of 27 teachers were interviewed, from different types of high schools, distributed more or less evenly between North, South, and Central Italy. The interviews were semi-structured, and the objective was to identify what kind of representation of Asian religions the teacher offered the pupils, which online resources had been chosen for this task, the reasons for this choice, and how they were used in the classroom. Initial questions also included whether and how the teacher dealt with the notion of religion in general. The interviews were carried out from January 2023 until April 2024. The resources indicated by the teachers amounted to 79 units, mostly short- and medium-length videos on YouTube, ranging from documentaries or film clips uploaded onto the platform, to amateur footage of temples or religious ceremonies, to videos created ad hoc by different types of Youtubers, including TCR teachers. Other resources analyzed included websites and artifacts (e.g., PowerPoint presentations) created by teachers and pupils based on their own online research.

The analysis of both interviews and online resources was carried out with the qualitative analysis software QDA Miner, applying codes divided into three macro-categories: "Eurocentric conception of religion", "orientalist gaze", and "religious/educational influence of TCR". These three macro-categories are interrelated. The first macro-area brings together the epistemological problems discussed in the first challenge (see above Section 2), namely an essentializing and homogenizing understanding of the various religions. Essentializing is also functional to the exercise of the orientalist gaze to the extent that Asian religions are artificially emphasized in their 'otherness' with respect to the Western religious mainstream, often in a positive sense, a process that actually stresses European values and ideals disguised as exotic features. Sometimes these representations also cast a negative light, showing the downsides of being 'other' from the West. Under the macro-area of "orientalist gaze", I also identified the points where representations of Asian religions responded to the imperatives of utilitarian and expressive individualism discussed under the third challenge. Under "religious/educational influence of TCR", I highlighted the points where the Eurocentric conception of religion and the orientalist gaze were functional to the pedagogical and theological agendas of TCR.

In general, we can anticipate that the main Asian religions addressed by teachers are Hinduism and Buddhism, and traditions such as Daoism, Confucianism, and Shintoism occupy a second position. There is considerable interest in Shintoism due to the general fascination with Japan and the influence it has on contemporary Italian pop culture. As it will be shown, Hinduism and Buddhism are considered more in-depth because Hinduism is generally considered as the non-Abrahamic tradition that, apart from the category of the founder, best matches the WRP; with regard to Buddhism, apart from the strong interest it arises in general among students, it is often reduced to the figure and teaching of the historical Buddha Siddartha Gautama, to be placed alongside the figure of Jesus as his counterpart. Moreover, the fact that Buddhism/the teaching of the historical Buddha is often presented as a tradition that is not 'completely religious' since it (supposedly) has no deities, teachers are less reluctant to propose it to their students as a 'neutral' source of spiritual inspiration. These tendencies are also fairly reflected in the percentage distribution of topics in the analyzed resources: Buddhism 37%, Hinduism 29%, Shintoism 14%, Taoism 11%, and Confucianism 6% (figures rounded down).

In the following, I will discuss the representations of each of these religious traditions, showing the interplay between the way teachers represent religions and the representations within the online resources, emphasizing the three aforementioned issues of "Eurocentric conception of religion", "orientalist gaze", and "religious/educational influence of TCR".

4. Hinduism

Almost all teachers apply a clear WRP scheme to Hinduism. Although they note that the figure of the founder is missing, they indicate the sacred texts, the creed or doctrine, and the moral precepts as the main elements. Thus, the representation is rather schematic, simplified, and monolithic, leaving out the multiplicity of traditions and sub-traditions with their different theological, soteriological, and ritual orientations. In fact, Hinduism is substantially characterized as being based on a specific set of books, the Vedas (sometimes limited to just the four *saṃhitā*), which are said to contain the doctrinal foundations: the *saṃsāra* cycle of rebirths, the mechanism of *karman*, and the soteriological goal of escaping from *saṃsāra* through union with the principle of *Brahman* (sometimes called "the one God"). The latter is almost always said to manifest in the three main deities of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva. In other words, the concept of *trimūrti* is given a far greater centrality than is found in modern and premodern Hinduism (Burkhalter Flueckiger 2015, p. 20; Bailey 2008). All these meanings are said to be encapsulated in the syllable *oṃ*, presented in this sense as the symbol of Hinduism. Teachers are conscious of the obvious fact that there is a far greater number of deities. They tend, however, to look for a consistent schematism, in line with the WRP paradigm: besides a precise set of books, a well-defined doctrine, and the main deities, there are also precise sets of sacred 'places', 'people', and 'times': the temple; the river Ganges, sometimes associated with Varanasi/Benares as the 'holy city'; the brahmins and gurus; and a set of Hindu festivals, which, ironically, change depending on the text or online resource consulted. Usually, Holi or Dīpāvalī are included. The topic of actual religious practice, the point where the WRP paradigm shows its flaws the most, is not often touched upon. In fact, many teachers mention yoga and/or meditation as the main form of worship, while others simply mention a generic veneration of deities or the practice of purification in the Ganges. The importance of orthopraxis, exemplified, for instance, by the rites of passage (*saṃskāra*), is almost totally ignored.

The resources on Hinduism analyzed repeated the same pattern, especially the slides created by students. Even when more details were offered, this proclivity toward systematization in a coherent manner of the enormous complexity and contradictory nature of Hinduism was evident, sometimes lapsing, in this search for schematism at all costs, into gross errors. For example, a video (material n° 19)[3] created by a TCR teacher interpreted the left side of the syllable *oṃ* in its best-known form, i.e., the ligature in cursive *devanāgarī* (ॐ), as indicating the numeral "3", in reference to the *trimūrti*. Similarly, another video, again by a former TCR teacher (material n° 24), schematized the four *puruṣārtha* or 'purposes of life' by linking them univocally to each of the four *āśrama* or 'stages of life', with paradoxical results, such as the affirmation that the stage of the student, the *brahmacharya*, is linked to the purpose of *kama*, mostly understood as sexual pleasure only.[4] A similar rigidity is maintained in the explanation of castes in most resources, always presented as the *varna* system, and not the more complex and empirically correct *jātī* system. Sometimes resources offer detailed information about different categories of texts, such as Brāhmaṇa, Āraṇyaka, Upaniṣad, or the difference between *śruti* and *smṛti*, but apart from this, there are only sporadic mentions of epics, while the literature of the Purāṇa is never mentioned.

One notices a peculiar dichotomy in the resources on Hinduism: on the one hand, there is a wealth of information on doctrinal and theological topics; on the other hand, there is a lack of the same care in the treatment of lived religion (the aforementioned *saṃskāra*, the modalities of *pūjā*, etc.). Lived religion is dealt with simply through images. For instance, one video juxtaposes a detailed and systematic treatment of Hindu doctrines with long shots of a temple in Italy, which are, however, devoid of any illustrative commentary, except for a rather notional list of the deities named. Other videos have a 'folkloristic' flavor in that they show various scenes of religious life (but also simply images of famous areas, such as Benares) without any commentary or accompanied by translations of excerpts from hymns to deities (e.g., material n° 11).

This dichotomy serves the pedagogical–religious agenda of TCR teachers. Not a few explicitly state that the most important dimension to be addressed is the doctrinal

one, since it contains the answers to humanity's supposed universal questions, and it is where, from a (often implicit) Catholic perspective, a part of 'Truth' can be identified[5]. This may explain the interest in the *trimūrti* as relatable to the Christian trinity. The importance of showing rituals, especially festivals, and sacred places, i.e., the dimension that is referred to as 'cultural', has the aim, which we may call secondary, of showing that religion is still a positive and benign phenomenon present in the various human societies. In addition, it is important for teachers that the various religions must offer something personally and spiritually relevant to the pupils. In the case of Hinduism, teachers see yoga, meditation, or in general the stereotype of Hinduism as the religion of the inner sphere, as positive elements. One teacher praises Indian prisons in which meditation practice among inmates lowers the rate of recidivism; another even proposes breathing exercises in the classroom to show how relaxation and greater concentration on oneself can be achieved. One consequence of this benign view of religion in general, and Hinduism in particular, leads many teachers to address the issue of caste division as a kind of degeneration of Hinduism's core values due to the misunderstanding or malice of men.

This focus on doctrinal elements and the need to show their positive or even useful side to our society inevitably leads to orientalist representations. For example, one teacher states that, in India, meditation is a ubiquitous cultural trait, as they are used to practicing it every day. Therefore, yoga practiced in the West is only a 'gym' imitation. Another states that Hinduism is more a philosophy in which one seeks the divine within oneself. The resources used greatly amplify these orientalist readings. One clip (material n° 12) affirms that it is through meditation that Hindu practitioners understand what is written in the Veda. Another defines *mantra* as "mental and energetic devices" (material n° 19). Yet another video describes the devotional *ārtī* ritual, in which one pays homage to a deity by waving lights, as an occasion to "energize oneself and bring peace and love into daily life". The same video defines yoga as a holistic practice aimed at happiness (material n° 27). One can see, in such emphasis on Hinduism as a path to self-realization according to contemporary understanding, an influence of the imperative of expressionist individualism mentioned above (see Section 2). Other orientalist characterizations that appear in various resources assign Hinduism ecological value. Since everything is Brahman, nature and animals are supposedly considered sacred. It should be noted in this regard that the topic of religions and ecology in these last few years is very much on the minds of TCR teachers, as it is linked to 2015 Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Sì* ("Praise Be to You")[6], precisely devoted to environmental issues. Particularly illustrative of the orientalist gaze is a YouTube video reproducing an episode of an Italian TV program from 1978, entitled *Voices from the Occult* (material n° 23). The episode is dedicated to the *yogi* in India. Unfortunately, the emphasis is on the exotic traits of these *yogi* who perform particularly spectacular *āsana* (yoga postures) in front of the camera, and on scientific experiments on the influence of yoga on human physiology.

The orientalist gaze is not always positive. Some teachers mention deities that are particularly different from Western canons, such as Kali or Shiva, and portray them as dangerous deities that the faithful must pacify. A negative orientalist gaze that serves the TCR agenda is exemplified in a video (material n° 24) by a journalist and former TCR teacher, with 14,000 subscribers on his YouTube channel. It is an openly apologetic channel, but has been pointed out by several teachers. In his video on Hinduism, the essentializing and simplifying explanations of doctrinal elements serve as a theological contrast with Christianity. The soteriological goal of Hinduism, defined as an extinction in the indifferent flow of nature, identified with the *Brahman*, is criticized as inferior to the fullness and love of the Christian god. Other teachers (few) have also hinted at the downsides of Hinduism, such as the loss of individuality in *Brahman* or the fact that the absorption within oneself of yoga practice can even lead to "spiritual and psychological problems".

5. Buddhism

The importance of the concept of the founder within the Eurocentric paradigm of religion, the influence of orientalist lenses, as well as the inevitable parallel with the figure of Jesus, lead basically all teachers to represent Buddhism with an almost exclusive focus on the figure of Siddhartha Gautama. Consequently, the essence of Buddhism is identified in the four noble truths, the concepts of *karman*, *saṃsāra*, *nirvāṇa*, and enlightenment, which are said to express the personal experience of the historical Buddha. In fact, almost every introduction to Buddhism starts with a detailed narration of the biography of the historical Buddha, while narratives about what happens from the beginning of the preaching to the present day are considered irrelevant and left out. The bare minimum is to give a hint of the threefold division into Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna, and their geographical location, sometimes with the observation that Theravāda has most preserved the original teachings of the historical Buddha. None of the teachers interviewed mentioned the differences in doctrine and practice in the various Buddhisms in Asia, let alone interactions with pre-existing religious traditions. On the contrary, the idea of a strong homogeneity between all expressions of Buddhism is conspicuous in teachers' discourses. Besides doctrines, the other cornerstone of Buddhism is ethics, encapsulated in the five (sometimes ten) precepts, and in the Eightfold Path, which is defined as the exemplification of every Buddhist's way of life. Since this concept informs the eight-spoked wheel, it is referred to as the symbol of all Buddhisms. Regarding Buddhist practice, meditation is obviously considered central. One teacher demonstrates a certain orientalist and stereotypical understanding in stating that all Buddhists learn to meditate from childhood, which is why meditation in the West is not the original practice. Doctrines and precepts are said to be contained in sacred texts, identified in an unspecified Tripiṭaka, without further distinction between Pali, Tibetan, or Chinese canon. One can see in these representations the influence of orientalist conceptions at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, in which Buddhism was primarily a philosophical/ethical system preached by a philosopher/spiritual reformer (see above Section 2). In fact, quite a few teachers address the question of Buddhism as a religion or philosophy in class, with different answers, but all agreeing that Buddhism is not an 'ordinary' religion because it lacks the idea of God/gods.

Arguably, this conception of Buddhism more as a philosophy or way of life without dogmas of faith allows teachers to address more freely the topic of the four noble truths as directly relevant to the moral and spiritual development of their pupils, which is important to the TCR pedagogical agenda. In particular, the theme of the elimination of desires is linked to a critique of contemporary consumerist society, or, in the case of adolescents, of addiction to alcohol, drugs, or more simply, the Internet. The point is to show that there are valid ethical/existential alternative outside the fulfilment of material desires. In this sense, the Buddha is placed side by side with the figure of Jesus as a 'life coach'. Similarly, monks are portrayed as the pinnacle of morality and abstinence, since they live in total poverty. As in the case of Hinduism, there are some teachers who consider Buddhist meditation to be a practice that can somehow be taken out of its context and that can also be experienced in the classroom. Other more modern orientalist interpretations qualify Buddhism as an ecological religion, in relation to the concept of compassion for all sentient beings, the possibility of being reborn as an animal, and in general to its holistic worldview. Finally, also in relation to famous publications by the 14th Dalai Lama (2005), some teachers point to Buddhism as a religion/spirituality that is also close to science.

On the other hand, this rationalist conception of Buddhism does not prevent it from being included in a WRP scheme in which not only the founder, sacred texts, and doctrinal foundations, but also the specialists of the sacred, sacred places, and times, such as Buddhist festivals, are individuated. It is interesting to note here the case of one teacher. She, convinced of the validity of the WPR scheme, was intent on finding information on Buddhist weddings, unaware of the fact that it is a dimension of the social sphere in which Buddhism is traditionally not directly involved, but does step in together with specialists from other traditions. For example, in Thailand, the wedding officiant is a layman or an expert of the

local spirits, the *phi* (Swearer 2010, pp. 58–63). However, as a result of her online search, she found four videos on YouTube (materials n° 31–34), two of which, despite the title, do not depict a Buddhist wedding at all. The third is a blatant modern development to attract tourists eager to get married in a self-styled 'Buddhist rite' in Thailand. The fourth video shows a recently established Buddhist wedding within the modern Buddhist movement, Soka Gakkai, in Italy. In short, these are modern and relatively marginal phenomena, interesting for a discussion of Buddhism's ability to adapt to contemporary demands, but certainly not representative of most Buddhist religiosity.

However, most of the resources show the influence of Eurocentric and orientalist conceptions of Buddhism. Almost all the teachers show clips from Italian director Bertolucci's famous film *Little Buddha* in their classes, demonstrating the centrality of the historical Buddha figure. Several videos and slides reiterate the WRP pattern, creating a kind of hybrid between primitive Buddhism, when, for instance, monks are described as itinerant ascetics in the wilderness, only settling during monsoons, and contemporary Theravāda Buddhism, almost always citing the Pali Tripiṭaka as the sacred text, or mentioning the 'Buddhist New Year' (i.e., the Thai Songkran), lately very popular among tourists and known as the "Water Festival". The predilection for Theravāda Buddhism is reiterated in various resources that portray this branch as closer to the original Buddhism, in which the historical Buddha is regarded as a man, unlike Mahāyāna, which departs from the original teachings and contemplates many deities.

In fact, most of the resources show several examples of an orientalist–modernist reading of Buddhism. One video (material n° 30) features a monk of European origin described as the 'happiest man in the world', and accordingly Buddhism is presented as a 'science of the mind' that can bring happiness and psycho–physical well-being. Another resource (material n° 50), which presents itself as a documentary on Buddhism in general, but actually focuses only on a specific modern Taiwanese monastic order, the Fuo Guan Shan, depicts Buddhist teachings in an exquisitely contemporary key: purification from negative *karman* is a process of self-improvement, *nirvāṇa* is a spiritual status devoid of any worries, and meditation, the main practice, can be applied to overcome any obstacle in life. The same applies to other videos showing the benefits of mindfulness, or to other resources that recollect phrases attributed to Buddha found on the Internet, which teachers use as discussion starters in class. Actually, they are no more than inspirational quotes informed by contemporary self-help philosophy, with no reference to *sūtra* or anything else. An example of such a quote is: "They asked the Buddha why his disciples always seemed so cheerful; his answer was: They do not regret the past nor worry about the future; they live in the present, that is why they are joyful". (material n° 51). Interestingly, a similar quote is found in a video on Laozi (material n° 54, see below Section 6). Here, the influence of the imperatives of expressionist and utilitarian individualism mentioned above (Section 2) clearly emerges. Also, online resources hint at the 'green' dimension of Buddhism, such as stereotypical images of temples or monasteries always located in remote mountains, or the emphasis on the ecological commitment of contemporary Buddhist institutions.

Although most resources present a positive, if not enthusiastic, reading of Buddhism, critical views, always linked to an orientalist–modernist view, are not entirely absent. One documentary (material n° 53), although of above-average quality, ends up providing a deterrent impression of Tibetan Buddhism as being linked to "incantatory and exorcistic" rituals. Another video (material n° 43) of the aforementioned apologetic YouTube channel also presents Tantric Buddhism in negative terms. In addition, it concludes the presentation by emphasizing the nihilism and egoism in general of Buddhist mysticism if compared with Christian mysticism. This is related to the implicit competition between the figure of Jesus and that of the Buddha. Interestingly, one teacher informed me that he addresses in class the question of whether or not Buddha was right in affirming the absence of the soul.

6. Daoism and Confucianism

In this case, the most influencing factors on the representations are: the emphasis on the doctrinal dimension as fundamental according to TCR teachers, the interest in the figure of Laozi, but especially of Confucius, as the ideal of the teacher to be placed alongside Jesus, and the orientalist understanding of these traditions as basically spiritual philosophies or lifestyles, in which there are no gods or, if present, are of minor importance, especially when it comes to Confucianism. We also need to take into account the short time, at most a lesson or two, that teachers are able to devote to these traditions.

As a result, there is an emphasis on narratives around the figures of Confucius (his activities during a period of political turmoil) and Laozi (the episode of handing over the Daodejing to a guardian, as he passes the frontier riding an ox), although some teachers are aware of the latter's dubious historicity. Regarding Daoism, teachers often present it by explaining the symbol of *taijitu*, essentially equating Daoism with the doctrine of *yin-yang*, ignoring the fact that this cosmological vision actually has a pan-Chinese, not to say pan-Asian, dimension. Through the idea of *yin-yang*, Daoism is portrayed as a doctrine of inner balance and, together with other concepts such as non-acting, or the idea of Dao as "emptiness", teachers are easily induced to propose it to students as a relevant philosophy for personal reflection. One teacher makes a connection between the emptiness of the Dao and the benefits of 'emptying oneself' from the overabundance of information that pupils are constantly exposed to via smartphones. Indeed, the orientalist stereotype of the 'oriental sage', whose wisdom anyone can benefit from, clearly transpires in the choice of those teachers that present students with various aphorisms attributed to Laozi and Confucius, mostly taken randomly from the Internet and thus often mere attributions to these figures of banal maxims typical of a contemporary self-help philosophy. One example is: "a winner always finds a way, a loser always finds an excuse", attributed to Laozi (material n° 9). It is not surprising, therefore, that a teacher tells how her pupils are so enthusiastic about Daoism or Confucianism that they jokingly say that they have been converted to Daoism. This is due to a strong reconfiguration, if not outright distortion, of the representation of Asian traditions according to contemporary value frames. A glaring example is provided by a video on Confucius (material n° 60) in which no key concepts of his doctrine (the idea of *ren* or "humanity", the five relations, rituality, etc.) are mentioned, but rather trivial and commonsensical advice on everyday life, yet charged with an 'oriental aura'. Even when the information offered by the resources is more accurate and detailed, as in the case of Daoism presented in documentaries or by knowledgeable (but not academic) Youtubers, it is clear that there is a rationalizing intent, which emphasizes the philosophical aspects closer to a modern sensibility and downplays aspects that would sound 'superstitious' or 'folkloristic'. Indeed, none of the teachers or resources mention the concrete expressions of contemporary Daoist religiosity, such as the traditions of Tianshi (Heavenly Masters) or Quanzhen (Supreme Perfection). The only exceptions are two YouTube videos (materials n° 51–54) by the above-mentioned journalist and TCR teacher. The first deals more with the philosophical aspects, the other with the religious aspects, including the two traditions just mentioned. The quality of the information is above average, but the reason is that he takes inspiration (not to say he outrightly plagiarizes it) from the video of another renowned YouTube channel[7], which is thoroughly based on the academic study of religions. However, it is noteworthy that, in the Italian reworking of such videos, the treatment of doctrinal elements applies a terminology clearly influenced by utilitarian and expressionist individualism, with expressions such as "flowing with nature", "living in the present", "letting go of anxieties and worries", and "stepping out of the comfort zone", absent in the original.

Although the main tendency is to approach Daoism and Confucianism primarily for their doctrinal or philosophical content, there is no shortage of teachers and resources applying a WRP scheme, with the founder, sacred texts, symbols, deities, festivals, etc. As a result, inconsistencies and misrepresentations arise. The most common is the definition of Laozi as the founder of Daoism and the Daodejing as the sacred text. The categories of

symbols, festivals, and deities in particular show their lack of usefulness. The *taijitu* symbol is also assigned to Confucianism. The calendar of festivities in China is fundamentally linked to the so-called Chinese folk religion, and therefore has a strong trans-religious character and changes depending on regionality. However, well-known holidays, such as the Chinese New Year, are sometimes attributed to Daoism, sometimes to Confucianism. Regarding the deities, sometimes they are said to be non-existent, since in these traditions, as one resource states, "God = nature". At other times, the Sanqing or Three Pure Ones of Daoism are named (again out of affinity with the Trinity), and Heaven and Earth are the supposed deities of Confucianism. Further, at other times, certain deities, such as the so-called "City Gods", are mentioned as belonging either to Confucianism or Daoism, while they actually were deities that appeared across different Chinese religious traditions, especially in late imperial times (Goossaert 2015). Ancestors are rarely considered as deities, and in general are hardly mentioned. As a matter of fact, with the exception of two teachers (one of whom also graduated in Religious Studies at a non-theological university, the other who had studied Chinese religion in depth), I found no awareness of the Chinese religious situation, namely the coexistence of the so-called *sanjiao* (Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism), the importance of the Chinese folk religion, the common elements, such as ancestor worship, and the lack of exclusive adherence or practice to a single religion. Nevertheless, even in the case of these two teachers, their intention was to focus on the teachings of Laozi and especially Confucius as an ideal of humanity to be compared with the Catholic–Christian ideal. Finally, as already mentioned in this paragraph, also in this case, we have positive considerations of Daoism (sometimes of Chinese religiosity in general) as an 'ecological' tradition, as it preaches to 'flow with nature' and its temples are said to be immersed in nature.

7. Shintoism

Many pupils are fascinated by contemporary Japanese pop culture, especially manga and anime. This prompts many teachers to exploit this interest to address Shintoism. However, this strong juxtaposition of Shintoism and *tout court* Japanese culture can further facilitate essentialist, Eurocentric, and orientalist readings. In fact, there is a particular self-orientalist discourse developed in Japan, but then spread around the world through a rich publishing production, which is called *nihonjinron* ("theory about Japanese people", Befu 2001). It asserts that Japanese culture is homogeneous, totally *sui generis*, and impervious to understanding by foreigners, especially Westerners. At the root of this particularity is often placed Shintoism, considered to be Japan's immutable religious tradition. This is reflected in positive orientalist representations by teachers, who link the Shintoist idea of purity to the image of order, cleanliness, and self-control conveyed by many stereotypes about Japanese culture. This also serves TCR's overall agenda of demonstrating that religion is still an influential element in contemporary society. To affirm this, the WRP scheme is applied to Shintoism, resulting in misrepresentations, especially in reference to the lived practice in Japan: while mentioning the *kami* (superhuman beings, deities) as innumerable, teachers feel the need to indicate the main *kami* and—above all—to identify them with precise functions or characteristics. The choice falls on the *kami* of imperial mythology, especially Amaterasu as the goddess of the sun or Susanoo as the god of the storm. This ignores the plasticity of the concept of *kami* in Japan and the fact that, through interaction with Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, they have been variously interpreted according to historical and geographical contexts (see supra Section 2). Other stretched understandings are the idea that the 'Shinto believers' must perform at least one *misogi* (purification ritual) a year, that there is a *kamidana* (altar of the *kami*) in every home, or the characterization of elements of Shinto–Buddhist syncretism, such as the Obon festival and the *butsudan* ancestor altar, as purely Shintoistic. It is noteworthy that practices that are actually largely widespread in Shinto shrines, such as asking for luck talismans or writing supplications to the *kami* on wooden tablets, are often labeled as "fun facts", i.e., non-central elements.

Two examples of misrepresentations well exemplify the consequences of trying to encapsulate a subject as multifaceted as Shintoism in simple patterns. In the first representation (PowerPoint slides created by a teacher), it is claimed that the *mitsutomoe* (a circular coat of arms formed by three commas) is a kind of 'triple *tajitu*' and as such is an important symbol of Shintoism representing yin, yang, and the universe. In reality, it is merely a decorative coat of arms, and although linked to a very popular *kami*, Hachiman, it is normally devoid of any particular theological connotations.[8] The second misleading representation is provided by a teacher who names an unspecified "mud festival" as exemplifying Shintoism. In reality, it is a particular sub-genre of *matsuri*, the typical collective celebration of Japanese religiosity. The teacher in question had been struck by a photo showing young Japanese men covered in mud in the few pages dedicated to Shintoism in a book on the world's various religions (material n° 64), thus interpreting it as one of the main holidays.

In this regard, it should be noted that in Italy, as in other parts of the world, Japan is regarded both with admiration and exotic curiosity as a bizarre cultural alterity (Miyake 2015, pp. 93–103). In fact, some teachers and resources present a negative orientalist approach. One lecturer takes advantage of the equation "Shintoism = Japanese culture" to link the topic of groupism with the social problem of *hikikomori* in Japan, i.e., voluntary social isolation by young individuals. This is because recently this problem has also been found among Italian adolescents[9], and the TCR educational agenda is very sensitive to pupils' existential issues. The consequence, however, is the forced juxtaposition of Shintoism, Japanese culture, and social problems. Another video (material n° 65) explicitly argues that a large part of the social problems in contemporary Japan (*hikikomori*, suicides, etc.) are due to the pragmatic attitude of Japanese religiosity, which cut across Shintoism, Buddhism, and even Christianity, without there being a genuine and authentic affiliation for any of the three.

The general tendency, though, is one of admiration for Japanese Shintoism/culture. The *nihonjinron* discourse mentioned above is repeated on several occasions. Although some teachers and most resources address the coexistence of Buddhism and Shintoism in Japan, the latter is regarded as having its own unchanging essence, unaffected by Buddhism. This essence is often said to be a simple religiosity, based on ideals of purity and harmony between humans and *kami*. The above-mentioned teacher who has a good training in non-confessional religious studies is aware of the impossibility of finding patterns in which to frame Shinto rites and mythologies. Nevertheless, he tries to identify a theological core in Shintoism that can correspond to the above-mentioned universal questions of humanity presupposed by TCR (material n° 67). A very emphasized aspect is the one related to nature, because *kami* are equated to natural elements and are worshipped in natural places, thus implying that Shinto has ecological value because it conceives nature as sacred. Often famous anime with explicit ecological messages, such as Hayao Miyazaki's films, are cited and used as multimedia resources to draw this parallel between Shintoism and ecology, a link which is actually attributed by Western film critics and audiences (Ogihara-Schuck 2014).

8. Potentially Positive Elements from a Study-of-Religions Perspective

Although the combination of the various factors discussed above reinforces a number of misleading representations of Asian religions, I have found elements, both in the resources and in the interviews, that, if valorized within the frame of the academic study of religions, can offer more nuanced and alternative representations.

For example, in an interview (material n° 22) with an Italian Hindu nun belonging to a tradition that worships a particular avatar of the Devi, she candidly states that the choice of Dīpāvalī as the official holiday for the Italian Hindu Union is actually due to the bureaucratic nature of the agreement between the Italian government, where it must be indicated an official holiday. Such a video may show that there are other important deities beyond the stereotype of the *trimūrti*, and that there are differences from the conception of holidays typical of a culture informed by Christianity. I have already mentioned that

there are videoclips of Hindu rituals of good ethnographic value, but they are without commentary (e.g., materials n° 19 and 26). I have also already mentioned a couple of videoclips about Buddhist marriages (Section 5). The intent of the teacher was to simply insert Buddhism into a WRP scheme. However, these videos, if rightly interpreted, could be an example of contemporary ritual developments of Buddhism worldwide, responding also to economic–touristic factors.

There are some parts of videos and documentaries that emphasize the strong internal diversification within Buddhism, even in forms contrary to the stereotypical view of a Buddhism centered on meditation or philosophy, such as Pure Land Buddhism. Again, sometimes it is acknowledged that rituals and the accumulation of karmic merits are an important part of the various types of Buddhism, even in the case of those considered more meditation-centered, such as Zen. In other videos (materials n° 55–59), it is explained that the *yin-yang* doctrine is not exclusive to Daoism alone, but is a pan-Chinese conception, or that the range of Daoist practices encompasses not only an intellectual or ritual dimension, but also bodily, dietary, medical, shamanic, and many others. It has also already been mentioned that a Youtuber much followed by TCR lecturers has practically translated into Italian two very good videos on Daoism and Confucianism, taken from the channel of a Youtuber based on the academic study of religion. Several videos on Shintoism, while they often lapse into orientalism in their over-emphasis of the exceptional nature of this religion, also rightly observe that the dimension of belief and of exclusive belonging have little relevance, and that practices that in the West would be defined as superstitious are instead pivotal.

The teachers themselves sometimes show some awareness that religions do not work following simple schemes, or that there are risks in overly simplistic comparisons, as between the Dalai Lama and the Pope, or between Hindu texts and the Bible or the Koran. Some (a few, two) explicitly denounce the futility of a WRP scheme, and one lecturer in particular claims to focus on examples of lived religion. As already mentioned, there are cases where particularly knowledgeable teachers are aware that, in China or Japan, the different religions are interconnected and share common elements, and therefore the concept of Western religion must be applied with care. In particular, when discussing Asian religions in Italy, quite a few lecturers were aware that these traditions have been adapted to a different context. Similarly, for some teachers, the fact that concepts and images of Asian religions have now become global cultural heritage, through media such as films, anime, and manga, does not necessarily mean a distortion or degeneration. It is true that such attitudes may be motivated by TCR's intention to show the value of the religious dimension in contemporary society, but at the same time, they help to move away from an essentialist interpretation. Similarly, a teacher who shows pupils how practices similar to meditation or *mantra* recitation can also be found in Christianity, on the one hand denotes an apologetic intent, and on the other is an opportunity to counter orientalist polarization between the East and West.

9. Conclusions

In this article, it was argued that the use of online resources for teaching Asian religions within confessional teaching tends to undermine a balanced representation of Asian religions, also in situations where there are no catechetical aims, and instead religious pluralism is positively embraced. This happens due to the interaction of several factors. First, there is the fact that a modern/Christian-centric paradigm of religion is not applicable to Asian religions without creating distortions. However, from modernity onwards, these same traditions have developed and undergone hetero- and self-representations in a way that responds to Euro-American concepts, values, and expectations. In addition, the way in which information is transmitted, used, and re-processed on the Internet and social media often tends to reinforce pre-existing biases, rather than question them. Lastly, there is the TCR's educational-theological agenda, which is committed to demonstrating the relevance and positive influence of religions (especially Catholicism, but not only) to contemporary

society, to the existential/moral/spiritual growth of pupils, and to issues of intercultural dialogue.

As a result, the application of a WRP scheme to Asian religions frames them into patterns easily assimilated by the pupils, and aims at emphasizing two points: first, that the essential core of every religion is the doctrines, which answer the 'universal questions of humanity'; second, that religions are present and identifiable in all cultures with a fairly precise pattern: founder, sacred texts, symbol, festivals, etc. The orientalist reading of Asian religions, according to which they have a message that is more philosophical than theological, and in line with contemporary Western values (e.g., the benefits of meditation in daily life or ecological messages), means that they are more likely to be used as an opportunity to inspire moral or spiritual reflection in pupils.

In the analysis of certain resources and interviews, I identified some elements that depart from this kind of representational logic. This does not undermine the general tendency of teachers to represent Asian religions. Nevertheless, from a perspective of pragmatic collaboration between the academic study of religions and confessional teaching, these elements represent cues for dialogue with a view to bringing this teaching closer to the standards of the academic study of religions.[10] It should be noted that all the teachers, while acknowledging their position as staunch Catholics who bear witness to the Christian message through their work, are convinced that they are dealing objectively with religions and thus contributing to intercultural and interreligious dialogue. As already mentioned, some have an academic training sophisticated enough to recognize the problems inherent in certain Christian-centered notions of religion. Others have an intercultural sensitivity that leads them to classroom discussions that challenge the tendentially monolithic view of religions. Indeed, in the Italian context, situations of dialogue between TCR and academic study of religion are not absent, where academics, even those who would advocate a non-confessional teaching of religions in schools, offer training to TCR teachers.[11]

However, the idea that through the encounter with (the message of) religions there can be an 'inner' enrichment of the pupil is always very strong. Using English RE terminology, TCR teachers do not seem to be aware of the difference between "learning about religion", i.e., to gain an objective and factual knowledge about the empirical variety of religions, and "learning from religion", i.e., to engage in subjective and personal reflection through the encounter with religions (Engebretson 2006). The above discussion showed how confusing the two plans is detrimental to a neutral and nuanced representation. In my opinion, a collaboration between TCR and the academic study of religion should not only aim to provide up-to-date information and modalities of representation of Asian religions (the same applies for any religious tradition), but also to make TCR teachers aware of the double epistemological–educational perspective involved in the TCR educational agenda. On the one hand, they intend to provide objective information on which to base a serious discourse of intercultural education. On the other hand, from the Catholic perspective of interreligious dialogue, according to which there is a spark of Christian Truth in other religions, they intend to provide an education that also includes the moral, existential, and spiritual spheres. The former is compatible with the academic study of religion, while the latter, we have seen, presents critical issues. A TCR teacher who is aware of these differences should be able to switch from one perspective to the other in pursuit of their educational goals and, above all, should also make their pupils aware of when one perspective is adopted over the other, and of their differences.

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Notes

1. See, for example, (Engebretson et al. 2010; Ubani 2018; Welling 2020). In the special issue of *Religions* on "Religions and Intercultural Education" (Skeie and Johannessen 2022), many articles explore the topic from a confessional perspective. In general, confessional religious education often also includes an overview of other religions. See, for example, the case of Germany, Spain, and Italy (Kjeldsen and Jensen 2014a, 2014b, 2014c).
2. Which has increasingly been a target of marketing strategies (Dangelico and Vocalelli 2017).
3. When referenced like this, it indicates the study material identification number in the list of study materials available for open sharing. See infra the Data Availability Statement.
4. According to the idealised visions presented in pre-modern legal–moral texts, such as the *dharmasūtras* and *dharmaśāstras*, the four *puruṣārtha* are: *dharma*, meaning the pursuit of wisdom for correct ethical, social, and religious conduct; *artha*, meaning the management and pursuit of wealth, social status, career, and health; *kama*, meaning the pursuit of satisfaction of sensual and emotional pleasures; and *mokṣa*, meaning liberation from the cycle of rebirth. The four *āśrama* are *brahmacharya* or studenthood, to be carried out in celibacy. Then there is the *gṛhastha*, the phase of the married householder, which then shifts into the *vānaprastha* phase, known as the forest way, which represents the time to let new generations take over. Finally, the *saṃnyāsa*, or renunciation phase, is marked by strong asceticism. Although it can be guessed that a certain *āśrama* is more characterised by certain *puruṣārtha* than others (e.g., *dharma* for the *brahmacharya* or *artha* and *kama* for the *gṛhastha*), Olivelle (1993) denies that there is an univocal correspondence between a single phase and a single purpose.
5. See Vatican II Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, 2: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men".
6. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (accessed on 28 May 2024).
7. https://www.youtube.com/@ReligionForBreakfast (accessed on 28 May 2024).
8. Intrigued by this fact, I retraced back to the Italian page on Shintoism in Wikipedia where this interpretation is found. No other sources are provided, but this idea of 'Japanese-style *taijitu*' seems to have quite an appeal, since it is repeatedly taken up by various amateur sites on Japan and Shintoism. Authoritative sources, such as Kokugakuin's online encyclopaedia on Shintoism (https://d-museum.kokugakuin.ac.jp/eos/ accessed on 28 May 2024) and Brian Bocking's dictionary on Shintoism (Bocking 1997), do not mention *mitsutomoe* as a Shinto-related term. To my knowledge, the only source that mentions a theological meaning of *mitsutomoe*, different though from the Wikipedia entry, is Herbert ([1967] 2010, p. 43). However, the point is that, given the absence, even among the members of the current association of Japanese shrines (Jinja Honchō), of a precise orthodoxy (Breen and Teeuwen 2010, p. 6), and given the exegetical freedom that has characterized the historical development of Shintoism (ib. *passim*), it is not uncommon that, on certain occasions, a decorative element may be enriched with different levels of symbolism, depending on the contexts.
9. https://www.hikikomoriitalia.it/ (accessed on 28 May 2024).
10. The position of the author of the present study is that a teaching of religions in state schools should be managed by the state and entrusted to teachers with degrees from non-theological universities. However, this does not detract from the fact that a collaboration is desirable with a view to improving the educational offer of this part of school education, especially in relation to the growing interest in other religions in curricula and by TCR teachers.
11. This happens in situations where TCR teachers decide to pursue a further degree in the study of religions at Italian universities (Ventura 2022, p. 52; Lettieri 2009, pp. 545, 546). There are also other situations of cooperation, such as (purely by way of example) the San Bernardino Institute of Ecumenical Studies in Venice or the Giovanni XXIII Foundation for Religious Sciences in Bologna, where training for TCR lecturers is also entrusted to university lecturers, or various training initiatives on the study of religions offered by universities, such as the University of Rome La Sapienza, in which TCR teachers also enroll.

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