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Conflicts, Tensions, and Mythmaking at Eranos

89/2 (2023)

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Conflicts, Tensions, and Mythmaking at Eranos
Before and After World War II

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Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni perseguono nel loro campo speciale i fini della scienza e della cultura. Alla scienza storica contribuiscono facendo oggetto di storia la religione nel suo svolgimento. Alla cultura schiudono più larghi orizzonti, promuovendo una maggiore partecipazione del pensiero italiano alla conoscenza di forme e momenti di civiltà meno prossimi e meno noti.

(Raffaele Pettazzoni 1925)

STUDI E MATERIALI DI STORIA DELLE RELIGIONI

89/2 (2023)

Conflicts, Tensions, and Mythmaking at Eranos Before and After World War II

Sommario

Note / Notes

Materiali / Materials

Notiziario / News

Recensioni / Reviews

The Theme of Asian Religions as a Challenge and an Opportunity for Nonconfessional Religious Education

Introduction

The study of Asian religions, informed by postcolonial/deconstructive critiques, has contributed to rethink the general field of the study of religions. Case studies on East and South Asian religions (hereafter, Asian religions) have shown how a modern, commonsensical idea of "religion" does not apply[1]. In addition, they have illustrated how the commonsensical understanding of Asian traditions is influenced by the historical, cultural, and political entanglements with the Euro-American worlds on the very issue of "religion"[2] and contributed to the awareness of the historical and cultural specificity of this concept[3]. Given this illuminative (but not exclusive) role of the topic of Asian religions, can it also bear relevance to the issue of teaching religions in public schools from a nonconfessional perspective?

The aim of this article is to show how the theme of Asian religions can be a useful lens to identify modern and Eurocentric hegemonic discourses that may hinder a comprehensive understanding of these traditions even in self-proclaimed nonconfessional Religious Education (RE). I will critically examine some recent trends in nonconfessional RE in Europe, analyzing how the idea of "religion" is conceptualized and addressed in institutional documents, theories, and practices. Where applicable, I will also examine how Asian religions are actually represented and addressed.

This "lens" of Asian religions will first be articulated and discussed as three "challenges" to be acknowledged when dealing with this topic. The first challenge concerns the resistance of many Asian religious phenome-

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[1] A.Y. Chau, *Modalities of doing religion*, in D.A. Palmer *et al.* (eds.), *Chinese Religious Life*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, pp. 67-82; R. King, *The Copernican turn in the study of religion*, in Id. (eds.), *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*, Columbia University Press, New York 2017, pp. 1-22; D.S. Jr. Lopez, *Belief*, in M.C. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1998, pp. 21-35; B.S. Turner - O. Salemink, *Introduction: constructing religion and religions in Asia*, in Id. (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Religions in Asia*, Routledge, London, New York 2015, pp. 1-14.

[2] U. App, *The Birth of Orientalism*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 2010; J.Ā. Josephson, *The invention of religions in East Asia*, in S. Turner - O. Salemink (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Religions in Asia*, cit., pp. 17-29.

[3] T. Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000; T. Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, how European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2005.

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na to a Protestant-based concept 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 understanding and practice of Asian religions.

The selected case studies of RE come from Sweden and England, which stand as pioneers in establishing RE without a confessional character and are addressed to all pupils of any confessional or nonconfessional position. The beginning of Sweden's nonconfessional RE can be dated back to 1962, with the establishment of the compulsory subject of *Kristendomskunskap* ("knowledge about Christianity") from an explicitly neutral and objective perspective, which subsequently developed into the present-day *Religionskunskap* ("knowledge of religions")[4]. The last major revision of the subject curriculum took place in 2011. The educational system of Sweden is centralized, and RE is regulated by the national curriculum. According to Dalevi and Niemi[5], a theoretical debate on the didactics of RE (e.g., fundamental concepts and aims) remains underdeveloped, and RE teachers tend to rely directly on the RE curriculum as well as their personal training and experience. Osbeck and Franck[6] note that the majority of RE research in Sweden has focused on general education themes, such as the dynamics of socialization, rather than subject-specific contents. Therefore, I will examine the case of Sweden, with a focus on the curriculum and the research of actual school practice.

Unlike Sweden, 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, SACRE comprised representatives from the Church of England, local educational authorities, local teachers, and local religious communities. SACRE agree on and issue the RE syllabuses with the only national-level provisions that it «shall reflect the fact that religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain» and prohibiting the teaching of «any catechism or formulary which is distinctive of any particular religious denomination»[7]. Given the high degree of freedom assigned by this legislative framework, there is a lively debate on the theory and practice of RE[8], which will therefore be the focus of this study.

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[4] W. Alberts, *Integrative Religious Education in Europe: A Study-of-Religions Approach*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2007, pp. 221-225.

[5] S. Dalevi - K. Niemi, *RE didactics in Sweden – defined by the national curriculum? Discussing didactics of RE in a swedish context*, in «Usuteaduslik Ajakiri» 69, 1 (2016), pp. 62-78.

[6] C. Osbeck - O. Franck, *Funded research in relation to curriculum development – tendencies in religious education in Sweden 2001-2019*, in «Religions» 11, 10 (2020), art. no. 521. doi: 10.3390/rel11100521.

[7] UK Parliament, *Education Reform Act 1988*, Sections 8.3 and 84.8.

[8] W. Alberts, *Integrative Religious Education in Europe*, cit., pp. 111-210.

In particular, new developments following an influential 2018 report will be examined as a remarkable, albeit with distinctions, alignment with the current epistemologies of the study of religions, particularly Asian religions.

There is increasing interest in RE as a research object within the academic study of religions. Studies range from a more descriptive-analytical focus[9] to a more critical examination from the perspective of the study of religions[10] up to normative studies proposing Study of religions-based RE didactics[11]. Apart from an essay by Cush and Denise[12] and my recent monograph[13], there have been no attempts to discuss RE from the perspective of the study of Asian religions. This article builds on my monograph and thus aims to disseminate some of its outcomes. However, it also expands its conceptual and empirical scope through the conceptualization of an additional challenge (the third) and the inclusion of new data from the Swedish RE and from recent developments in English RE, especially those elements that may actually benefit from an engagement with the challenges provided by Asian religions.

First Challenge: Inadequacy of Eurocentric Paradigms

One of the most deep-ingrained thinking about religion is the so-called World Religions paradigm (WRP)[14]. From the nineteenth century onward, under the influence of a Protestant understanding, religions have primarily been conceived as coherent wholes, different and separate from each other,

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[9] W. Alberts, *Integrative Religious Education in Europe*, cit.; J. Berglund, *The study of Islamic education: a litmus test on state relations to Muslim minorities*, in S. Führding (ed.), *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion: Working Papers from Hannover*, Brill, Leiden - Boston 2017, pp. 232-258; F. Pajer, *Scuola e università in Europa: profili evolutivi dei saperi religiosi nella sfera educativa pubblica*, in A. Melloni (ed.), *Rapporto sull'analfabetismo religioso in italia*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2014, pp. 59-97.

[10] W. Alberts, *Religious education as amall 'i' indoctrination: how European countries struggle with a secular approach to religion in schools*, in «CEPS Journal» 9, 4 (2019), pp. 53-72; doi: 10.25656/01:18834J. Berglund, *Swedish religion education: objective but marinated in Lutheran protestantism?*, in «Temenos - Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion» 49, 2 (2013), pp. 165-184. doi: 10.33356/temenos.9545; K. Frank - C. Bochinger, *Religious education in Switzerland as a field of work for the study of religions: empirical results and theoretical reflections*, in «Numen» 55, 2-3 (2008), pp. 183-217. doi: 10.1163/156852708X283041; T. Jensen - K. Kjeldsen, *RE in Denmark – political and professional discourses and debates, past and present*, in «Temenos - Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion» 49, 2 (2014), pp. 185-224. doi: 10.33356/temenos.9546.

[11] B.O. Andreassen, '*Knowledge about Religions' and analytical skills in religious education: reflections from a Norwegian context*, in «CEPS Journal» 9, 4 (2019), pp. 73-90. doi: 10.26529/cepsj.676; T. Jensen, '*Jensen's scientific approach' to religion education*, in «CEPS Journal» 9, (4) 2019, pp. 31-51. doi: 10.26529/cepsj.707; K. Kjeldsen, *A study-of-religion(s)-based religion education: skills, knowledge, and aims*, in «CEPS Journal» 9, 4 (2019), pp. 11-29. doi: 10.26529/cepsj.678.

[12] D. Cush - C. Robinson, *Chapter 5 'Buddhism is not a religion, but paganism is: the applicability of the concept of 'religion' to dharmic and nature-based traditions, and the implications for religious education*, in P. Hannam - G. Biesta (eds.), *Religion and Education. The Forgotten Dimensions of Religious Education?*, Brill, Leiden 2020, pp. 66-84.

[13] G. Lapis, *Religion, Education, and the "East": Addressing Orientalism and Interculturality in Religious Education through Japanese and East Asian Religions*, Edizioni Ca' Foscari, Venezia 2023.

[14] C.R. Cotter - D.G. Robertson (eds.), *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies*, Routledge, Oxon 2016; T. Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, cit.

whose adherents are expected to entertain an exclusive affiliation. A key element in their mutual incompatibility is their sets of beliefs clearly encoded in sacred texts, which are objects of faith and rational debate[15].

Asian religions provide numerous examples that challenge this paradigm. One misleading parameter is exclusive affiliation. Many lay practitioners in contemporary China and Japan have addressed multiple religious traditions, such as Buddhism, Daoism, Shintoism, local traditions, and Christianity, without the concern of exclusive belonging or incompatibility of beliefs[16]. Daoist specialists may be hired for performing a *jiao*, a blessing ceremony to ensure a prosperous renewing of the lifecycle[17]. When it comes to funerary rites, however, the same people who participated in this *jiao* will probably rely on Buddhist specialists.

A similar discourse applies in Japan, with Shintoism replacing Daoism. The history of Buddhism and Shintoism also provides an example of the deep interlock between traditions. From its arrival in Japan (fifth century), Buddhism increasingly incorporated both doctrinally and ritually local deities (Jp. *kami*), interpreting them first as in need to be quelled by Buddhist doctrine and then as protectors of Buddhist teachings. Finally, through complex hermeneutical devices developed within esoteric Buddhism (Jp. *mikkyō*), *kami* were conceived as local manifestations (Jp. *honji suijaku*) of Buddhist deities[18]. The term *shintō* began to indicate a self-conscious tradition only from the sixteenth century, when an intellectual movement interpreted *kami* as the original essence of Buddhist deities. However, the doctrinal and ritual contexts were still imbued by Buddhist principles. Subsequent developments increasingly replaced Buddhist frames with Confucian or indigenous frames, but religious practices combining Buddhist and *kami* worship continued. The situation changed when the Japanese government, at the onset of its modernizing and nationalizing project (end of the nineteenth century), declared that Shintoism, as the "indigenous faith of Japan," must be separated from Buddhism[19]. Contemporary interesting developments have shown that not only

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[15] R. King, *Imagining religions in India: colonialism and the mapping of south Asian history and culture*, in A.S. Mandair - M. Dressler (eds.), *Secularism and Religion-Making. AAR Reflection and Theory in the Study of Religion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, p. 49; B. Stoddard - Craig Martin, *Stereotyping Religion: Critiquing Clichés*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London - New York 2017.

[16] A. Chau, *Modalities of Doing Religion*, cit.; R. Kisala, *Japanese Religions*, in P.L. Swanson - C. Chilson (eds.), *Nanzan Guide to Japanese Religions*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu 2006, pp. 3-13; J.R. LeFebvre, *Christian wedding ceremonies: 'nonreligiousness' in contemporary Japan*, in «Japanese Journal of Religious Studies» 42, 2 (2015), pp. 185-203; Cf. also statistics in M.K. Roemer, *Japanese survey data on religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices in the twenty-first century*, in I. Prohl - J.K. Nelson (eds.), *Handbook of Contemporary Japanese Religions*, Brill, Leiden 2012, pp. 23-58; F. Yang, *Atlas of Religion in China: Social and Geographical Contexts*, Brill, Leiden 2018.

[17] P. Andersen, *s.v.* "*Jiao*", in F. Pregadio (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, Routledge, London 2008, pp. 539-544.

[18] M. Teeuwen - F. Rambelli, *Introduction: combinatory religion and the honji suijaku paradigm in pre-modern Japan*, in Id. (eds.), *Buddhas and Kami in Japan: Honji Suijaku as a Combinatory Paradigm*, RoutledgeCurzon, London - New York 2003, pp. 1-53.

[19] J. Breen - M. Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto*, Wiley Blackwell, Chichester 2010.

centuries-old rituals involving both Buddhist and Shintoist actors and deities are being re-enacted, but even new Shintoism-Buddhism combinatory rituals are being developed[20]. The Japanese case shows not only the pointlessness of strict separation between traditions, but also that the doctrinal dimension, as in the case of Shintoism, is not an essential or immutable feature.

A similar discourse applies to Hinduism. Scholars have attempted to identify the main traits of Hinduism. Flood[21] indicates «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»[22] (4). While the centrality of the Vedas' revelation may be distinctive, theological confrontations among and within the six orthodox *darśana*, or the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava traditions, disputed different metaphysical positions[23]. Other foundational ideas, such as *karma*, *dharma*, *mokṣa*, and a cosmology centered on Mount Meru, resonate with those of Buddhism and Jainism[24]. Doninger also observes 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-Hindū traditions) in his or her head»[25].

Another Eurocentric stereotype depicts religions as pre-eminently pertaining to the inner private sphere and the other-worldly dimension, empathizing morality, intellectualism, and the individual experience at the expense of outward expressions, such as rituals. This is the influence of modern discourses of religious evolution and progressive disenchantment[26]. Another factor was the romantic interpretation of religious experience as the true essence of all religions[27].

Chan/Zen Buddhism is often associated with "experience" or "disenchantment." This has both cultural-historical reasons (see next paragraph) and relates to Chan/Zen's rhetoric of «a separate transmission apart from the teachings, not relying on scriptures, pointing directly at the human mind,

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[20] L. Dolce, '*And the* zasu *changed his shoes': the resurgence of combinatory rituals in contemporary Japan*, in G. Bulian - S. Rivadossi (eds.), *Itineraries of an Anthropologist. Studies in Honour of Massimo Raveri*, Edizioni Ca' Foscari, Venezia 2021, pp. 151-80. doi: 10.30687/978-88-6969-527-8/008.

[21] G. Flood, *Introduction: establishing the boundaries*, in Id. (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2003, p. 2.

[22] *Ibi*, p. 4.

[23] F. Clooney, *Restoring 'hindu theology' as a category in Indian intellectual discourse*, in G. Flood (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, cit., pp. 447-477; G. Colas, *History of vaiṣṇava traditions: an esquisse*, *ibi*, pp. 229-270; G. Flood, *The śaiva traditions*, *ibi*, pp. 200-228.

[24] W. Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, Viking/Penguin, New York 2009, p. 39.

[25] *Ibi*, p. 44.

[26] N. Gane, *Max Weber and Postmodern Theory. Rationalization versus Re-Enchantment*, Palgrave, Hampshire 2002, pp. 15-22; I. Strenski, *Understanding Theories of Religion: An Introduction*, 2nd ed., Wiley Blackwell, Malden - Oxford 2015, pp. 45-72.

[27] C. Martin, *Experience*, in M. Stausberg - S. Engler (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook for the Study of Religion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016, pp. 525-540.

seeing the nature and attaining Buddhahood». However, this rhetoric must be historically considered as functional to the construction of Chan/Zen's peculiar identity in contrast to other traditions that based their teaching on specific scriptures[28]. Actually, Chan/Zen developed its own huge literature, and its practices and monastic life, differently from the popular image of eccentric Zen masters, were and still are strictly encoded and regulated by rigid formalism. Moreover, in contemporary Japan, "enchanted" practices, such as worship of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and ancestors, or ritual services for funerals, gaining karmic merits, or appeasing spirits are still part of the Zen life of both monks and temple parishioners[29].

An influential phenomenon throughout Asia has been Tantrism, which is characterized by strong corporeality and rituality. Through a sweeping generalization, it can be said that in tantric traditions, the physical body is the privileged tool for religious goals, for it is the microcosmic manifestation of the supreme principle to be ritually channeled in «creative and emancipatory ways»[30]. Common ritual patterns involve hand gestures or *mudrā*, formulaic utterances (*mantra* and *dhāraṇī*), and visualization patterns (*maṇḍala* and *yantra*). These religious modalities do not aim only at "lofty" goals, such as "liberation during life" (Sk. *jīvanmukti*)[31] or "becoming a buddha with this very body" (Jp. *sokushin jōbutsu*)[32]. Instead, the «world of Tantric practice is a continuum that draws on both the transcendent and the pragmatic approaches»[33]. Davidson argues that the spread of esoteric Buddhism (and Tantrism in general) results from its absorption of concepts and imaginary of warfare and political power[34].

A "practical" approach has been, and still is, a key feature of Asian religiosities. Many Theravāda Buddhism rituals employ the chanting of *paritta*, short extracts from the Pāli Canon, during consecration ceremonies, funerals, and death anniversaries, as well as for the opening of a new business or during weddings to advert misfortune or ensure prosperity[35]. In China, Chau identifies an «Immediate-Practical Modality», crosscutting all religious traditions[36], which applies almost identically in Japan[37]. Here, religious actors

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[28] T.G. Foulk, *The spread of Chan (Zen) Buddhism*, in A. Heirman - S.P. Bumbacher (eds.), *The Spread of Buddhism*, Brill, Leiden - Boston 2007, pp. 433-456.

[29] J. Borup, *Japanese Rinzai Zen Buddhism: Myōshinji, a Living Religion*, Brill, Leiden 2008, p. 4; T.G. Foulk, *Ritual in Japanese Zen Buddhism*, in S. Heine - D. Wright (eds.), *Zen Ritual: Studies of Zen Buddhist Theory in Practice*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, pp. 21-82.

[30] D.G. White, *Introduction*, in Id. (ed.), *Tantra in Practice*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2000, p. 9.

[31] A. Rigopoulos, *Hindūismo*, Queriniana, Brescia 2005, p. 262.

[32] M. Raveri, *Il pensiero giapponese classico*, Einaudi, Torino 2014, pp. 186-192, 205-209.

[33] D.G. White, *Introduction*, cit., p. 30.

[34] R.M. Davidson, *Sources and inspirations: esoteric Buddhism in South Asia*, in Id., *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia*, Brill, Leiden 2011, pp. 19-24.

[35] K. Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism: Continuity, Diversity, and Identity*, Wiley Blackwell, Chichester 2013, pp. 125-128.

[36] Chau, *Modalities of doing religion*, cit., pp. 76-80.

[37] I. Reader - G.J. Tanabe, *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu 1998.

offer services to cope with any potentially critical aspects of everyday life, such as traffic safety, recovery from illness, making a good marriage, safe childbirth, business prosperity, and success in study. It is misleading to address such religiosity as "frivolous," as it implies an ethical commitment framed in a logic of exchange between petitioner and deity[38].

Second Challenge: The Historical Legacy of Modernity and Colonialism

The WRP, in connection with the colonial enterprise, was a critical factor in the creation of modern hetero-and self-representations of Asian religions.

In India, early scholars, colonial administrators, and missionaries addressed Brahmins and Muslim law-doctors as interlocutors in religious matters. That is, they addressed conservative religious specialists dealing with elite-written texts (*Veda* and *Qur'an*) fitting the preconceived idea of locating the "essence" of religion in ancient texts and of drawing a separation between Islam and the "religion" of India. This came at the expense of other texts, such as the *Purāṇa*, of ritual religious expressions and mutual borrowings between Islamic and Hindū traditions. This "sanitation" applied notably to Tantrism. The renowned sanskritist Monier-Williams (1819-1899) was the first to employ the term "Tantrism" to indicate what he saw as a degeneration of Indian religiosity into mere witchcraft[39]. At the same time, new ideas started spreading, such as the universality of religion and of religious experience, the rejection of ritual dimensions, and the emphasis on creedal belief and/or rational interpretation of doctrines. From these processes, the term and the idea of "Hinduism" gradually grew and entered the indigenous public sphere[40].

We see similar processes in the nineteenth and early twentieth century China and Japan. The term "religion" had to be translated with neologisms – *zongjiao* (Ch.) and *shūkyō* (Jp.) – which highlight the idea of a teaching (*jiao*, *kyō*) belonging to a lineage or "sect" (*zong*, *shū*). In Republican and Communist China, this brought about the recognition of five religions (Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism) codified along a modern concept of religion, while all other religious expressions (the so-called Chinese folk religion) were banned as superstitions (*mixin*)[41]. The latter term indicated all that was considered not «grounded in and strictly limited to the spiritual and moral self-perfection»[42]. The same occurred in Japan, with

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[38] *Ibi*, pp. 107-136, 192-205; G. Bulian, *I linguaggi del rito. Prospettive antropologiche sulla religiosità giapponese*, Mimesis, Milano - Udine 2018, pp. 103-105.

[39] H.B. Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*, University of California Press, Berkley - Los Angeles 2003, p. 67.

[40] E. Bloch *et al.* (eds.), *Rethinking Religion in India: The Colonial Construction of Hinduism*, Routledge, London - New York 2010.

[41] V. Goossaert - D.A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2011; F. Tarocco, *The making of religion in modern China*, in N. Green - M. Searle-Chatterjee (eds.), *Religion, Language and Power*, Routledge, London - New York 2008, pp. 43-56.

[42] V. Goossaert - D.A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, cit., p. 51.

shūkyō opposed to *meishin* ("superstitions"). Here, the idea of religion as a private matter concerned with morals and emotional or philosophical issues strongly influenced Buddhist schools, which reorganized themselves under the banner of *Shinbukkyō* ("New Buddhism"). Their agenda was to rearticulate Buddhist ideas and practices in accordance with modern sensibility: rationalism, rejection of ritualism, emphasis on morality and inner experience, convergence with science and so on. The overall perspective was to contribute to the creation of a strong modern Japanese nation[43].

A pivotal role was played by the local religious élite, educated in modern European standards, who framed the new discourses on religion, especially in nationalistic terms. Reformers such as Vivekānanda (1863-1902), Anagārika Dharmapāla (1864-1933), Shaku Sōen (1860-1919), Taixu (1890-1947), and Suzuki Daisetsu (1870-1966) actively promoted their traditions to western audiences. For example, at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions, Vivekananda presented Hinduism as a coherent tradition based on sacred texts (*Veda*), which preaches a fundamental unity with the Absolute that can be experienced through meditation. Furthermore, such inner religious experience is the unifying dimension that encompasses all other religions within Hinduism[44]. Dharmapāla presented Singhalese Theravāda Buddhism as a scientific religion, characterized by individualistic yet altruistic ethics, philosophically grounded in a «psychological mysticism and a cosmogony which is in harmony with geology, astronomy, radioactivity and relativity»[45]. He capitalized on the discourses of the first buddhologists, who depicted the original Buddhism as a rational and moral soteriology, often welcomed as an intriguing "atheist religion"[46]. Conversely, Japanese Buddhism was, at first, coldly received as a decaying phase. However, after World War II, due to a growing skepticism toward both religious traditions and rational thinking, Suzuki Daisetsu effectively promoted the image of *zen* as a tradition that, by dismissing the rational use of language, the rituals, and the institutional hierarchies, permits direct access to the authentic, ineffable universal human experience at the base of all religions[47].

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[43] J. Isomae, *The Conceptual Formation of the Category "Religion" in Modern Japan: Religion, State, Shintō**, in «Journal of Religion in Japan» 1, 3 (2012), pp. 226-245. doi: 10.1163/22118349-12341236; J.Ā. Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2012.

[44] C.T. Jackson, *Vedanta for the West: The Ramakrishna Movement in the United States*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1994; A. Rigopoulos, *Tolerance in Swami Vivekānanda's neo-Hinduism*, in «Philosophy & Social Criticism» 45, 4 (2019), pp. 438-460. doi: 10.1177/01914537198284.

[45] A. Dharmapāla, *Message of the Buddha*, in A. Guruge (ed.), *Return to Righteousness: A Collection of Speeches, Essays and Letters of Anagārika Dharmapāla*, Government Press, Ceylon 1965, p. 27, cit. in D.S. Lopez, *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2008, p. 15.

[46] Cf. *ibi*, pp. 153-197.

[47] R.H. Sharf, *The Zen of Japanese nationalism*, in «History of Religions» 33, 1 (1993), pp. 1-43; J. Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and the Columbian Exposition*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 2003.

In summary, Asian religious leaders promoted their traditions to western audiences through two strategies of self-orientalism based on the modern idea of religion. On the one hand, they exploited their "otherness" and contrasted themselves as the antithesis of the materialistic "West" devoid of spiritual values. On the other hand, they flipped over the western critique of backwardness. They claimed the modernity of their traditions by stressing the idea of the religious experience to be deepened by the individual person through meditation, by highlighting the universality of such an experiential dimension, by offering a rationalistic interpretation of (carefully cherry-picked) texts, or, even more, by arguing that such experience is supra-rational. This resonated positively with the Christian prototype of religion and modern subjectivity. It also mirrored the romantic, orientalist idea of Asia as the cradle of a universal "spirituality" forgotten by the "West," as well as the more Enlightenment-oriented views of those hoping to replace Christianity with a new atheist, rational religion such as Buddhism[48].

Third Challenge: Globalizing Traits in the Diffusion of Asian Religions

After World War II, movements such as the '60s counterculture saw in the modernized versions of Asian traditions an exotic alternative to their religious and cultural mainstream. While the rational and national/institutional elements were lessened, the supposed individualism and psychologism of Asian religions were celebrated as a means to obtain a higher level of consciousness and freedom from the constraints of Euro-American bourgeois society. Hence it began the idealization of the eccentric Zen or Daoist monk, free from ordinary societal ties and roaming in search of enlightenment, as found in literary works such as Keruac's *Dharma Bums* (1958)[49].

In the background, there is also the growing appeal of "spirituality" as a peculiar mode of religiosity focused on the subjectivity of the individual practitioner who rejects institutional doctrines and rites of established religions and instead creatively draws from many traditions to explore and enrich the "inner self," which is considered the real locus of the sacred opposed to an external, transcendental God[50].

Gauthier[51] offers a wide-ranging framework for interpreting these changes. He argues that, from the nineteenth century onward, a shift in the global religious landscape started. Briefly, modern religiosity was modelled after what Gauthier calls the "Nation-State Regime" and it was expected to be «ra-

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[48] J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought*, Routledge, London 1997.

[49] C. Campbell, *The Easternization of the West: A Thematic Account of Cultural Change in the Modern Era*, Routledge, New York 2007.

[50] P. Heelas - L. Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2005; H. Streib - C. Klein, *Religion and spirituality*, in M. Stausberg - S. Engler (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, cit., pp. 73-83.

[51] F. Gauthier, *Religion, Modernity, Globalisation: Nation-State to Market*, Routledge, Oxon - New York 2020.

tionalised, institutionalised, scripturalised, dogmatic, belief-centred, differentiated, (mono)theistic, hierarchical, centralised, ideological, homogenised, institutionalised, territorial, and nation-bound»[52]. Since the end of World War II, another regime, the "Global-Market" has gained increasing prominence. Its structuring principles are neoliberalism and consumerism, which influence religions through the two imperatives of utilitarian individualism and expressive individualism. The former emphasizes values such as self-realization, flexibility, constant improvement, and overcoming obstacles. The latter fuels a constant necessity for ideas, imaginary, and objects to continuously recreate and bestow "authenticity" to one's own identity by structuring one's life into "unique" lifestyles. In addition, as neoliberalism and consumerism tend to spread across all social spheres, religion has also started to "spill out" in formerly separated spheres, such as health, labor, and wellness.

Gauthier's frame suitably applies to many contemporary developments of Asian religions in Euro-American regions. Altglas[53] argues that western practitioners of modern Hindū traditions are drawn to them not only by mere exoticism but because they also see in them functional answers to their neoliberalism-and-consumerism-driven imperatives of being "positive," of managing stress and anxiety, and of striving for constant sensations of self-realization and fulfillment. Palmer and Sieger[54]argue that the popular western interpretations of Daoism offer remedies against social atomization through ideas of interconnectedness with the whole cosmos. Nevertheless, a strong individualist component remains, as no adhesion to a specific dogma or institutional membership is required. Furthermore, Daoist ideas and practices concerning gymnastic, dietary provisions, meditation, and even techniques to enhance sexual activity, abstracted from their traditional contexts, fit well the demand for emotional peak experience, the quest for wellness, and that for self-authentication. The case of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Therapy aptly shows how certain Buddhist meditative practices have been abstracted and rationalized into a supposedly nonreligious protocol for psychological health aimed particularly at coping with the pressure of a contemporary neoliberal competitive society[55]. Squarcini and Nencini[56] define as «ablated Hinduism» all those ideas, practices, and objects abstracted from their original Hindū contexts and creatively re-elaborated and commodified as tools for psycho-physical wellness and construction of one's own life-

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[52] *Ibi*, p. 5.

[53] V. Altglas, *From Yoga to Kabbalah: Religious Exoticism and the Logics of Bricolage*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014.

[54] D.A. Palmer - E. Siegler, *Dream Trippers: Global Daoism and the Predicament of Modern Spirituality*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2017.

[55] E. Braun, *Mindful but not religious: meditation and enchantment in the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn*, in D. McMahan - E. Braun (eds.), *Meditation, Buddhism, and Science*, Oxford University Press, New York 2017, pp. 173-197.

[56] A.M. Nencini - F. Squarcini, *Hinduism in Italy. A condensed history of a meteorological phenomenon*, in K.A. Jacobsen - F. Sardella (eds.), *Handbook of Hinduism in Europe,* vol. 2, Brill, Leiden 2020, pp. 1120-1125.

styles. Carrette and King[57] lament how many ideas and practices of Asian traditions have been re-articulated to re-enchant and justify practices of consumerism or business management. Irizarry[58] identifies various contemporary everyday uses of the word «Zen» that well exemplify the merging of the discourses on individual religiosity (keywords: *spirituality*, *new age*, *mysticism*) with the imperatives of individual utilitarianism (keywords: *cutting edge*, *energetic*, *inspirational*, *focused*, *in control*), expressive individualism (keywords: *creative*, *outside-the-box*, *cool*, *sophisticated*), and well-being (keywords: *relaxing*, *harmonious*, *natural*, *peaceful*).

Re-interpretations and re-elaborations are further facilitated by the increased role of the internet, which allows new forms of identity and community and, most importantly, permits to eschew traditional authority control in the creation of new religious ideas and practices[59]. A case in point is the creation of online communities of non-Japanese Shintō practitioners. Here, the theme of expressive individualism interacts with that of contemporary ecological lifestyles[60] as these communities tend to interpret *Shintō* as an environment-friendly religion[61].

Religious Education and the Challenges of Asian Religions: The Case of Sweden

Regarding the first challenge outlined above, the analysis of the Sweden RE curriculum reveals ingrained Eurocentric paradigms. There is a progressive focus on textual and doctrinal elements: if the core contents of years 4-6 (pupils from 10 to 12 years old) start from «Rituals and religiously motivated precepts», it is immediately clarified that the focus is on the «key ideas *behind* rituals»[62]. In years 7-9, the core contents are the «key ideas and documents»[63], and in the upper-school curriculum, the core contents include «relationship between religion and science in the current public debate» and «[a]

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[57] J. Carrette - R. King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*, Routledge, London - New York 2005.

[58] J. Irizarry, *Putting a price on Zen: the business of redefining religion for global consumption*, in «Journal of Global Buddhism» 16 (2015), pp. 51-69. doi: 10.5281/zenodo.1305896.

[59] H.A. Campbell - P.E. Teusner, *Internet and social networking*, in J.C. Lyden - E.M. Mazur (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*, Routledge, New York 2015, pp. 154-169.

[60] Which has increasingly been a target of marketing strategies, cf. R.M. Dangelico - D. Vocalelli, '*Green marketing': an analysis of definitions, strategy steps, and tools through a systematic review of the literature*, in «Journal of Cleaner Production» 165 (2017), pp. 1263-1279. doi: 10.1016/j.jclepro.2017.07.184.

[61] A.P. Rots, *Worldwide kami, global Shinto: The invention and spread of a 'nature religion*,' in «Czech and Slovak Journal of Humanities» 3 (2015), pp. 31-48; K. Ugoretz, *Do Kentucky kami drink Bourbon? Exploring parallel glocalization in global Shinto offerings*, in «Religions» 13, 3 (2022), article no. 257. doi: 10.3390/rel13030257.

[62] Skolverket [National Agency for Education], *Curriculum for the Compulsory School, Preschool Class and School-Age Educare*, Skolverket 2018, p. 220, available at <https://www. skolverket.se/download/18.31c292d516e7445866a218f/1576654682907/pdf3984.pdf> (my italics).

[63] *Ibi*, p. 221.

nalysis of arguments concerning ethical issues based on Christianity, other world religions, views of life and the pupils' own positions»[64]. Pupils are clearly meant to progressively engage religions as systems of ideas, which, in their last school years, are to be discussed in relation to science and ethical questions. In years 4-6, there is an explicit establishment of the "big five" world religions of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, but in years 1-3, pupils start learning religions limited to the three mono-theisms and with a focus on Christianity[65]. In other words, an understanding of religion as an abstract system of beliefs based on monotheisms can eas-ily become the paradigm of reference. Inner diversity is considered in the curriculum; however, Ensted interprets the curriculum's wordings such as «distinctive features» and «[v]arying interpretations and practices in world religions in today's society»[66] as implying a "tree model" of the evolution of religions[67]. This has a homogeneous origin, through division into main branches, until the multifaced, individualistic present. Nonetheless, it still implies an essentialist reading of religions as closed systems of mutually incompatible ideas, thus excluding the possibility of multiple affiliations. This understanding resonates with the findings of ethnographic research in schools. Here, hegemonic secularistic discourses among pupils, mirroring a modern Protestant concept of religion, push them into the essentialist in-terpretation of religious practitioners as individuals who are completely de-fined by their religious adherence without questioning inner variability or multiple identities[68].

Other issues are related to the stereotype of religion as a primarily in-ner-sphere, "existential" matter, as well as to the second and third challenges. The curriculum includes topics under the theme «identity and life issues», such as «what is important in life», «what a good life can be», and «what it may mean to do good» or «the purpose of life, relationships, love and sexu-ality»[69]. These are linked to the peculiar Sweden RE pedagogy of «life-ques-tions» (Swd. *livsfrågor*). That is, learning should go through questions that are 1) conceived as universally human, 2) offered as a lens to understand various religious traditions, and 3) used to foster the self-understanding of among pupils (e.g., «What is the meaning of life? What happens after death? Who are you, and how would you like to be as a person? What is morally right?»)[70]. The curriculum states that «teaching should create the conditions

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[64] Skolverket [National Agency for Education], *Religionskunskap*, Skolverket 2011, p. 2, cit., in D. Enstedt, *Religious literacy and moral development in non-confessional religious education and religious studies in Sweden*, in «Nordidactica» 12, 1 (2022), p. 36.

[65] Skolverket, *Curriculum for the Compulsory School*, cit., p. 220.

[66] *Ibi*, p. 221.

[67] D. Enstedt, *Religious literacy and moral development*, cit., pp. 34-35.

[68] K.K. Flensner, *Teaching controversial issues in diverse religious education classrooms*, «Religions» 11, 9 (2020), art. no. 465. doi: 10.3390/rel11090465.

[69] Skolverket [National Agency for Education], *Curriculum for the Compulsory School*, cit., pp. 221-222.

[70] J. Berglund, *Swedish religion education*, cit., p. 178.

for pupils to develop a personal attitude to life», and «reflect over life is-sues and their own and other's identity»[71]. Ethnographic studies have shown how life-question pedagogy tends to trigger a "spiritualist discourse," which privileges a religiosity made of private experience, existential questions, or finding an authentic self or something divine inside oneself[72]. Such discourse is prone to reproduce the colonial, orientalist, and globalized-marketized rep-resentations of Asian religions described in the second and third challenges. Flesner notes that Buddhism appears in class discourses as a rational, tol-erant, and atheistic religion compatible with secularism and individualism, or as a «feel-good philosophy»[73]. Other studies have shown that, notwith-standing the declared secular stance, the Sweden education system allows practices of yoga or mindfulness to be part of education in order «to strive for balance in body, mind and soul»[74] and as a part of a newly established subject «life skill education» (*livskunskap*) without considering them religious prac-tices. This is raising concerns among researchers on the issue of the religious neutrality of schools and on the "therapeutisation" of education[75]. This is a sort of internalization of the above-mentioned "Global Market" regime and a naturalization of the contemporary understanding of Asian religions, which strongly hinders their correct historical and cultural interpretations and fur-ther reaffirms a Protestant stereotype of religion[76].

Religious Education and the Challenges and Opportunities of Asian Reli-gions: The Case of England

As anticipated in the Introduction, English RE has a lively theoretical debate in which different, even conflicting, approaches can be observed. Concerning the first challenge, the approaches self-called «Post-liberal Re-ligious Education» and «Critical Religious Education» are noteworthy. The proponent of the former, Barnes, states that «[r]eligions are, at least, scheme of belief [...] There are key beliefs in each religion. It is these key beliefs and the differences between them that justify distinguishing between the differ-ent religions»[77]. Not only are religions different, but they are also mutually incompatible, precisely because of their «contrasting sets of beliefs (which purport to 'reveal' the same divine being and mediate salvation)»[78]. Such be-

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[71] Skolverket, *Curriculum for the Compulsory School*, cit., p. 218.

[72] K.K. Flensner, *Discourses of Religion and Secularism in Religious Education Classrooms*, Springer International Publishing, Cham 2017, pp. 89-117.

[73] *Ibi*, pp. 148-149.

[74] K. Niemi, *Drawing a line between the religious and the secular: the cases of religious education in Sweden and India*, in «Journal of Beliefs & Values» 39, 2 (2018), p. 186. doi: 10.1080/13617672.2018.1450806.

[75] C. Osbeck - O. Franck, *Funded research in relation to curriculum development*, cit., p. 15.

[76] K. Niemi, *Drawing a line between the religious and the secular*, cit.

[77] P.L. Barnes, *Education, Religion and Diversity: Developing a New Model of Religious Education*, Routledge, London 2014, p. 210.

[78] *Ibi*, p. 213.

liefs form the main content of RE. Pupils are expected to assess their coherence and the evidence through which religions present them as truth claims[79]. In addition, the volume *Critical Religious Education in Practice* states that «many religious believers do hold their beliefs as propositional beliefs […] they are beliefs about the way things actually are in the world»[80]. Here, RE fundamentally means rational assessment and comparison of doctrines from different religions conceived as truth claims[81]. The treatment of Buddhism focuses on doctrinal topics, such as the Four Noble Truths, the five aggregates, and the notion of conditioned arising[82]. The learning questions betray a rational-philosophical analysis: «is Buddhism a religion or a philosophy?», «Why value human life if it is illusory?» «Does belief in rebirth fuel self-interest?» «Are the three marks of existence self-evidently true?»[83]. Such an approach would totally miss the point when dealing, for example, with the relationship between Buddhism and Shintoism, or with the lived, practical side of many Asian religious phenomena. We clearly see a modernist, colonial understanding of Buddhism as a rational system of thought.

A peculiarity of English RE is the educational aim of «learning from religion», initially set up by Grimmit[84], adopted by the 2004 non-statutory national syllabus[85], and which has been highly influential in the RE debate. It refers to a process in which pupils reflect on their own experiences, especially in existential terms, by using religious ideas. Other RE approaches further develop and prioritize this aim. According to Erricker, RE should «help students develop personally and spiritually»[86], and the treatment of the subject content is dependent on this aim[87]. For example, Erricker proposes an activity on Hinduism based on the question «How effective is the concept of samsara as an explanation of change?»[88]. The reported impact on a pupil is clearly on existential terms: «…is a symbol to show that my life is always changing. If I try to stop it changing, I will fail. You cannot stop change. This is difficult sometimes because you don't want things to change»[89]. A similar approach can be seen in Hannam's study. She argues that religion should

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[79] *Ibi*, pp. 126, 241.

[80] C. Easton *et al.*, *Critical Religious Education in Practice: A Teacher's Guide for the Secondary Classroom*, Routledge, London 2019, p. 10.

[81] *Ibi*, pp. 1-18.

[82] *Ibi*, pp. 147-150.

[83] *Ibi*, pp. 149-150.

[84] M. Grimmit, *Religious Education and Human Development: The Relationship between Studying Religions and Personal, Social and Moral Education*, McCrimmons, Great Wakering 1987, pp. 225-226.

[85] QCA [Qualifications and Curriculum Authority], *Religious Education. The Non-Statutory National Framework* Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 2004, p. 11, available at <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20090903160937/http://qca.org.uk/libraryAssets/media/9817_re_national_framework_04.pdf>.

[86] C. Erricker, *Religious Education: A Conceptual and Interdisciplinary Approach for Secondary Level*, Routledge, London - New York 2010, p. 76.

[87] *Ibi*, p. 82.

[88] *Ibi*, p. 102.

[89] *Ibi*, p. 104.

be conceptualized from an existential perspective, and to flesh out such understanding, she draws on modern, contemporary, and even Christian thinkers such as Simone Weil and Kierkegaard[90]. Note that such a perspective is deemed «particularly close to what it means to live a religious life in the Dharmic traditions»[91]. The point in her argument is that the existential way of living religiously, which involves «exposing oneself to the world, letting the world speak and, more importantly, letting oneself be addressed by the world»[92], is considered the expression par excellence of political life. In other words, pupils are expected to be inspired by such a way of being religious in carrying out their individual and collective lives. Again, religion is reduced to an existential, inner-world matter, instrumentally articulated to cope with contemporary needs.

These approaches would probably ignore or even dismiss Chinese or Japanese «Immediate-Practical Modality» of being religious and run the serious risk of hiding or even reinforcing not only the modernist, colonial understanding of Asian religions, but, by engaging religions as "tools" for coping with existential needs, also the above-discussed "Global Market Regime".

However, new RE debates present such innovations that the three challenges mentioned above could even be transformed into opportunities. The report of the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) proposed reforming RE as a new subject called «Religious and Worldviews». One key point is the adoption of the concept of "worldview," of which religions are a sub-genre. Any individual is thought to have, consciously or not, a worldview (i.e., an overarching approach to life) that structures the understanding of the world and his/her place on it. It is not only a matter of propositional beliefs, but also emotional, affiliative, and behavioral dimensions. When a worldview is shared, organized, and embedded in institutions, we have an institutional worldview whose foremost example are religions. However, individuals, consciously or not, may adopt and creatively interpret only part of one or more institutional worldviews. Therefore, being made up of individuals, religions/worldviews are dynamic and complex, as they develop in interaction with each other, sharing commonalities as well as differences, and feature inner diversity throughout history and space, as they adapt themselves to new times and contexts[93]. Further developments in this approach have engendered interesting reflections. One noteworthy idea is that this approach should be aligned with the criticism of the WRP[94]. To my knowledge, this is the first

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[90] P. Hannam, *Religious Education and the Public Sphere*, Routledge, London 2019.

[91] *Ibi*, p. 87.

[92] G. Biesta - P. Hannam, *The uninterrupted life is not worth living: on religious education and the public sphere*, in «Zeitschrift Für Pädagogik Und Theologie» 71, 2 (2019), p. 182. doi: 10.1515/zpt-2019-0021.

[93] Commission on Religious Education (CoRe), *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward. A National Plan for RE. Final Report*, Religious education Council of England & Wales, London 2018, pp. 26-35; 72-77.

[94] C. Benoit - T. Hutchings - R. Shillitoe, *Wolrdview. A Multidisciplinary Report*, Religious Education Council of England and Wales 2020, pp. 7-8, available at <https://religiouseducation-

time this theme has been brought into English RE. As a result, the doctrinal dimension or the propositional beliefs of a religion are no longer considered the central element in all religions, but the relevance of this or other dimensions changes between and within religions according to times and contexts[95]. The possibility of «hybrid worldview» is acknowledged, and interestingly, O'Grady offers an example of a person practicing yoga but not in connection with the social or doctrinal dimensions of Hinduism[96]. The Eurocentric idea of religion is clearly challenged, and the above-described examples of Asian religious phenomena become contents to be fruitfully explored from such a perspective. The idea of "learning from religion," too, with its risk of emphasizing religion as a matter of the inner sphere, is challenged. If the CoRe report does not exclude that pupils should «reflect on their own personal responses to the fundamental human questions to which worldviews respond», Freathy and John state that the new RE should not aim at «nurturing and formatively influencing the spiritual life of the students» but instead introducing them «into the communities of academic inquiry associated with the study of religion(s)». To them, pupils' "inner worlds" and experiences are relevant only in relation to the reflexivity of their own position and cultural background in front of the object of study[97]. This theme of reflexivity is linked to the critique of the WRP and to the colonial dimension of both the concept of religion and the representation of non-European religions. This means engaging with the complexity of a contested concept of religion versus the secular[98], which O'Grady welcomes as a self-reflective and educational opportunity to avoid essentialism[99]. Tharani speaks of «decolonizing the curriculum» so that pupils may develop «not just functional religious literacy but a critical-historical religious literacy, so that they understand more fully the impact of colonialism and modernity on our worldviews and on the ways that we think about and study religion and worldviews»[100]. She also makes interesting suggestions for exploring the influence of capitalism and commercialization on religions[101].

In summary, the representations of religions and the closely related issues of colonialism and the Eurocentric concept of religion are thoroughly considered. This is also linked to a call for a critical examination of one's own pre-

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council.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/20-19438-REC-Worldview-Report-A4-v2.pdf>;   K. O'Grady, *Conceptualising Religion and Worldviews for the School. Opportunities, Challenges, and Complexities of a Transition from Religious Education in England and Beyond*, Routledge, New York - Oxon 2022, pp. 79-84; A. Tharani, *The Worldview Project Discussion Papers*, Religious Education Council of England and Wales 2020, p. 10, available at <https://www.religiouseducation-council.org.uk/news/project-world view-conversations/>.

[95] K. O'Grady, *Conceptualising Religion and Worldviews for the School*, cit., pp. 59-61, 76.

[96] *Ibi*, p. 78.

[97] R. Freathy - H.C. John, *Worldviews and big ideas: A way forward for religious education*, in «Nordidactica» 9, 4 (2019), pp. 19-20.

[98] C. Benoit - T. Hutchings - R. Shillitoe, *Wolrdview*, cit., pp. 24-25.

[99] K. O'Grady, *Conceptualising Religion and Worldviews for the School*, cit., pp. 54, 56.

[100] A. Tharani, *The Worldview Project Discussion Papers*, cit., p. 20.

[101] *Ibi*, p. 11.

conceptions and for an overcoming of too-fixed boundaries between religions and other areas of human behavior. Again, the examples of Asian religions mentioned in the second and third challenges become useful contents.

However, the CoRe report and its developments have not gone unchallenged. Barnes explicitly opposes the downgrading of religious beliefs and values because, in his view, they are what actually inform and inspire practices, narratives, and experiences[102]. He argues that only widely endorsed beliefs are relevant when considering an institutional religion, and that too much emphasis on inner diversity leads to useless dispersion into individual and idiosyncratic worldviews that have no relevance to the religious education and personal development of pupils[103]. Such resistance to the de-essentialization of religion remains strong because tantamount resistant is the idea that pupils should "learn from" religions in the form of coherent systems of thought. In fact, Trigg laments that without focusing on the centrality of beliefs, on their internal coherence, and on their claim to be truthful, they become pointless and irrelevant, especially for young pupils[104]. He eloquently concludes with «[t]he abyss of nihilism beckons»[105]. We can see here the resilience of both the idea of religions as self-contained, coherent systems of truth claims and the idea that their essence is a matter of disenchanted, intellectual, and moral dimensions.

We observe another objection to these new developments, even though in much less conservative terms. O'Grady, while welcoming the complexities of the conceptualization of worldviews, is still dubious about the emphasis on academic rigor in determining RE's contents and approaches. His educational approach is highly pupil-centered[106] and still endorses the idea of «learning from religion». Instead of exerting, through the abovementioned reflexivity on one's own position, what he calls a sort of «disciplinary policing»[107] on the experience of the pupils, he instead proposes that pupils should be facilitated to express their personal interests and experiences in relation to religious contents. Such "biographical data" should be given equal relevance to the other usual contents of RE because they are pivotal to the development of the personal worldviews of pupils[108]. His position is to enable pupils to be inspired by religions and worldviews in order to find alternatives to the *status*

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[102] P.L. Barnes, *Introduction: from religions to worldviews*, in Id. (ed.), *Religion and Worldviews. The Triumph of the Secular in Religious Education*, Routledge, New York - Oxon 2022, pp. 11-12.

[103] Id., *Does the worldviews approach provide a new paradigm for religious education?*, in Id. (ed.), *Religion and Worldviews*, cit., pp. 84-85.

[104] R. Trigg, *The philosophy of 'worldviews'*, in P.L. Barnes (ed.), *Religion and Worldviews*, cit., pp. 131-34.

[105] *Ibi*, p. 134.

[106] K. O'Grady, *Conceptualising Religion and Worldviews for the School*, cit., p. 190; cf. also Id., *Religious Education as a Dialogue with Difference: Fostering Democratic Citizenship through the Study of Religions in Schools*, Routledge, New York - Oxon 2019, p. 19.

[107] K. O'Grady, *Conceptualising Religion and Worldviews for the School*, cit., p. 84.

[108] *Ibi*, pp. 86-87.

quo toward a better future, such as challenging a neoliberal, competitive idea of society (including competitiveness among pupils)[109].

However, as agreeable as this may appear (personally speaking), I argue that the second and third challenges provided by Asian religions highlight a tension between this instrumental approach to religions and the need to provide a fair representation of them, especially the non-European ones. Given the deep colonial, modernist, and market-driven influences in the interpretation of Asian religions, I wonder which kind of alternatives to the *status quo* from Asian religions may fascinate young people, especially if we consider Euro-American contexts[110]. Arguably, the contemporary understanding of Asian religions among young people may actually enshroud with a veil of exoticism purebred modern and even neoliberal ideas and values, as Altglas, Carrette, and King[111] showed. We should, in fact, consider that present-day young people are particularly sensitive to the imperatives of utilitarian and expressive individualism. Since «[o]ne of the most important tasks of adolescents concerns the establishment of an identity»[112], then key consumerism ideas, such as lifestyle, are particularly influential in this regard[113]. Moreover, the flexibility of the labor market and the rise of new role models (such as social media influencers) force young people to create an «enterprising self» and to build an «aesthetics of existence» aimed at defining one's personal identity as unique, authentic, creative, and free[114]. Furthermore, as truly digital natives[115], young people are much more likely to develop their own personal understanding of Asian religions, informed by hegemonic neoliberal values, through multimedia web surfing rather than by addressing official texts or real-life practitioners. My empirical findings on the reception of Asian religions among Italian adolescents confirm these hypotheses[116]. If O'Grady's aims are to harness religious worldviews to counter neoliberalism, how will he actually handle those many understandings of Asian religions informed by the same neoliberal values, such as the example of

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[109] *Ibi*, pp. 142-43, 185.

[110] But not exclusively, cf. the second part of J. Borup - M.Q. Fibiger (eds.), *Eastspirit: Transnational Spirituality and Religious Circulation in East and West*, Brill, Leiden 2017.

[111] V. Altglas, *From Yoga to Kabbalah*, cit.; J. Carrette - R. King, *Selling Spirituality*, cit.

[112] I. Roberts, *Adolescence*, in P. Zwozdiak-Mayers (ed.), *Childhood and Youth Studies*, Learning Matters, Exeter 2007, pp. 85-98: p. 85.

[113] A. Bennett, *Youth and play: identity, politics, and lifestyle*, in J. Wyn - H. Cahill (eds.), *Handbook of Childhood and Youth Studies*, Springer Singapore, Singapore 2015, pp. 779-780.

[114] V. Cuzzocrea - S. Benasso, *Fatti strada e fatti furbo: generazione Z, musica trap e influencer*, in «Studi Culturali» 17, 3 (2020), pp. 335-356. doi: 10.1405/99452; H. Stokes - S. Aaltonen - J. Coffey, *Young people, identity, class, and the family*, in J. Wyn - H. Cahill (eds.), *Handbook of Childhood and Youth Studies*, cit., pp. 261-263.

[115] F. Introini - C. Pasqualini, *Generazione Z, i 'veri' Nativi digitali*, in E. Marta - P. Bignardi - S. Alfieri (eds.), *GENERAZIONE Z. Guardare il mondo con fiducia e speranza*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2018, pp. 81-108.

[116] G. Lapis, *Le religioni asiatiche secondo gli adolescenti italiani. Contesto, analisi e riflessioni su una tendenza verso il «regime di Mercato Globale»*, in «Annali di Ca' Foscari Serie Orientale» 59 (2023), pp. 719-762.

yoga practice related to wellness he himself cites[117]? If involving the personal interests of pupils is a central part of RE, how will he handle the risk of privileging a modernist, colonial understanding of Asian religions? What about religious phenomena that contemporary pupils (especially those inside hegemonic secularist discourses, as we saw in Sweden) may find "superstitious," such as the quest for practical benefits in Chinese or Japanese religiosity? If religions are engaged to find guidance in respecting the environment[118], does it mean overlooking the fact that the religious environmentalist paradigm[119], which often praises Asian religions, is a contemporary phenomenon related to the politics of self-representation in a global venue, as in the case of environmentalist *Shintō* cited above[120]?

Conclusion

By critically scrutinizing, through the theme of Asian religions, some recent instances of European RE that are open to all pupils and supposedly not aligned with any particular religion, we find that, in many cases, the alleged neutrality or inclusivity is seriously undermined by three intertwined elements: (1) an implicit hegemonic discourse based on a modern WRP, (2) a lack of awareness of colonial influence on Asian religions, and (3) a lack of awareness of social, cultural, and economic factors in the contemporary understanding of religion in general and Asian religions in particular. As a result, Asian religions run the serious risk of being represented in a partial, biased, and even instrumental manner.

The presence of implicit hegemonic discourses in nonconfessional RE has already been observed by other scholars. Frank and Bochinger speak of a «life-world-related RE» which affirms that any religious symbol can be meaningfully linked to the inner world of pupils, and thus, postulates that all humans have a basic religious orientation[121]. Similarly, Jensen and Kjeldsen define as a «small-c confessional RE» those teachings that represent all religion as being essentially a set of existential and moral questions, hence the relevance of RE to the existential growth of pupils[122]. They connect this understanding to the influence of Lutheran-Protestant existential theology. Alberts is also concerned about religions reduced as a sort of orientation for pupils and indicates even more sharply that the hegemonic universal notion of religion at work is so deeply Christian that one may

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[117] K. O'Grady, *Conceptualising Religion and Worldviews for the School*, cit., p. 78.

[118] *Ibi*, p. 176, cf. also p. 187.

[119] P. Pedersen, *Nature, religion and cultural Identity: the religious environmentalist paradigm*, in O. Bruun - A. Kalland (eds.), *Asian Perceptions of Nature: A Critical Approach*, RoutledgeCurzon, New York 1995, pp. 258-273.

[120] Cf. also A.P. Rots, *Shinto, Nature and Ideology in Contemporary Japan: Making Sacred Forests*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London 2017.

[121] K. Frank - C. Bochinger, *Religious education in switzerland as a field of work for the study of religions*, cit.

[122] T. Jensen - K. Kjeldsen, *RE in Denmark*, cit.

speak of «small 'i' indoctrination», which also implies biased representation of both Christianity and other religions[123].

My analysis confirms and adds further dimensions to these critiques, indicating other problematic conceptions connected to the WRP, such as the centrality of beliefs as a coherent system, the incompatibility among religions, and the exclusive affiliation of practitioners. I also show that the recent developments in English RE linked to the 2018 CoRe report represent a remarkable departure from previous approaches, including a critique of the WRP, the awareness of colonialism, the need for self-reflexivity, and even a blurring of the borders between religious and secular spheres. I argue that the topic of Asian religions may be a fruitful venue for exploring these issues. However, we still note a harsh criticism of these developments, indicating the resilience of the aforementioned hegemonic discourse on religion.

Another point of this article is that the topic of Asian religions highlights the negative implications of the seemingly neutral idea of "learning from religion," even in cases where it is sided with the complex concept of religion and an awareness of the problem of WRP (as in the case of O'Grady). This idea is based on a hegemonic discourse on religion as fundamentally a matter of existential and moral issues of individuals and resonates and reproduces colonial hetero-and self-representations of Asian religions, which in contemporary times further develop toward dimensions of spirituality, wellness, and lifestyle. When it comes to topics such as existential matter, identity formation, or even environmental ethics, Asian religions risk being pictured only in their very specific, nonrepresentative modernist version fitted to address contemporary needs and trends. Conversely, an approach to this topic from the perspective of the study of religion would help raise awareness of the deep influence of one's own historical and cultural background and to put these representations in a larger and more complex picture.

ABSTRACT

The research on Asian religions informed by the postcolonial/critical perspective has contributed to rethink the concepts, theories, and methods of the study of religions. This article explores the role of this theme in relation to nonconfessional Religious Education (RE). It first discusses the three "challenges" brought forth by the study of Asian religions: the inadequacy of the Eurocentric concept of religion, the legacy of modernity and colonialism, and some globalizing dynamics informed by neoliberal values. Then, on this background it analyzes some recent RE developments in Sweden and England. I argue that the theme of Asian religions is useful in spotting and overcoming Eurocentric, Christian-centric, and modernist assumptions, even when an inclusive and self-critical RE is supposedly set up.

Lo studio delle religioni asiatiche, informato da una prospettiva critica e postcoloniale ha contribuito al ripensamento di concetti, teorie e metodi dello studio

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[123] W. Alberts, *Religious education as small 'i' indoctrination*, cit.

delle religioni. Questo articolo intende esplorare il ruolo di questo tema in relazione alla Religious Education *(RE) non confessionale. Si discuterà inizialmente di tre "sfide" che lo studio delle religioni asiatiche porta con sé. Si tratta dell'inadeguatezza del concetto eurocentrico di religione, dell'eredità della modernità a del colonialismo e di alcune dinamiche di globalizzazione informate da valori neoliberali. Successivamente su questo sfondo si analizzeranno alcuni recenti sviluppi nella* RE *in Svezia e Inghilterra. Si argomenterà che il tema delle religioni asiatiche è utile nell'individuare e superare presupposizioni eurocentriche, cristiano-centriche e moderniste, anche quando si suppone che sia posta in essere una* RE *critica e inclusiva.*

KEYWORDS