

# 1 Framing The Issue: Research Aims, Topics, Methods

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**Summary** 1.1 Hypothesis, Problems and Research Aims. – 1.2 The Usage, Meanings and Reasons for Addressing 'Japanese and Other Asian Religious Traditions'. – 1.3 Logic and Structure of the Argument. – 1.3.1 The Three Theoretical Baselines. – 1.3.2. Synopsis of the Next Chapters.

## 1.1 Hypothesis, Problems and Research Aims

It is widely acknowledged that the religious traditions of Japan, as well as other East and South-Asian<sup>1</sup> religious traditions, have been subjected to different exotic and orientalist appropriations for a long time by Europeans who studied them (Faure 1993; Clarke 1997; Paramore 2016b).

Consequently, a more critical and self-aware study of these religions, informed notably by post-colonial and post-modern critiques, contributed to the rethinking (cf. Turner, Salemink 2015; King 2017b)

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of readability, I will often replace the wording 'South and East-Asian' with 'Asian' or 'East-Asian'. The latter choice meant to highlight that this work has a strong focus on the Eastern part of Asia, notably Japan, but also to acknowledge the relationships between South and South-East-Asian religious traditions with the East-Asian ones, especially in the modern period. Indeed, the former are often labelled in everyday discourses as 'Eastern' or 'Oriental' religions. Cf. *infra* this chapter and § 3.3.

of the study of religion<sup>2</sup> itself, in its essentializing assumptions, categories and concepts. Scholars engaging with these traditions reached conclusions that go as far as rejecting the term ‘religion’ itself as a meaningful category. They consider it instead to be a construction peculiar to the modern Euro-American cultural sphere, which, nonetheless, has been enshrined as a universal constant.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, many studies in these areas have fruitfully identified and analyzed the genealogies of these colonial, orientalist and even self-orientalist former interpretations of East/South-Asian religions in relation to developments in Euro-American cultural history, especially in the field of the study of religion<sup>s</sup>.<sup>4</sup>

The above cited works show that the study of Japanese and other East/South-Asian religions has the following, strong characteristics: first, it urges to rethink Christian-centric concepts such as ‘religion’, ‘faith’, ‘beliefs’, ‘(exclusive) belonging’ and to avoid their uncritical application. Secondly, it carries on a critical analysis of orientalist and colonialist epistemologies which are based on modern pretensions of universality. Thirdly, it entails a keen focus on the dynamics of self- and hetero-representations of identities which are influent to the modern and contemporary global relevance of East-Asian religions.

In other words, it seems that the theme of Japanese and other Asian religious traditions can play a peculiar – albeit, I want to stress, not exclusive – illuminative role regarding the study and understanding of the broad, complex and sensitive topic of ‘religion’. Therefore, the present work wants to probe the idea that addressing the same theme can also be a productive move to reveal hidden spots, tackle unquestioned assumptions, highlight problematic areas and offer useful insights for the field generally called ‘Religious Education’ (hereafter RE). It must be noted, however, the field I am particularly referring to should be specified as non-confessional RE; and in this regard the theme of Japanese and other Asian religious traditions is offered as a way to strengthen the critical and intercultural educational potential of such RE.

Indeed, when talking about RE, one should always be mindful that RE “comes in various shapes and each shape, besides, comes in various shades” (Jensen 2017b, 205). As a matter of fact, ‘Religious Education’ is a very generic term that covers all kinds of ways, often

**2** In this study I adopt the wording ‘religion<sup>s</sup>’, as employed in other important publications (Stausberg 2010; Stausberg, Engler 2016) to foreground the fact that, apart from studying what is typically referred to as ‘religions’ or ‘religious’, debates in this academic field frequently address theoretical questions regarding how to relate the variety of religions with the singular ‘religion’ as the conceptual point of reference.

**3** Fitzgerald 2000; Masuzawa 2005; Josephson 2015; Horii 2018.

**4** King 1999; Snodgrass 2003; Keppens, Bloch, Hegde 2010; App 2010; Dressler, Mandair 2011.

starkly different, of teaching religion and religions at school. From a certain point of view, we may say that there is a specific kind of RE for each country; since the relationship between school and religion runs parallel to the various configuration of relationships between states and religions institutions, RE may change accordingly. We may have, therefore, a RE which is confessionally oriented or not, compulsory or not, addressed to all or only to certain pupils, and so on. The most basic distinction is between confessional RE and non-confessional RE. The former entails the teaching of specific religious tradition(s) and is managed by the concerned – and, authorized – religious community/ies, often in cooperation with the state.<sup>5</sup> The latter entails provisions for teaching matters concerning religions from an external perspective and under management of the state, albeit not necessarily excluding the cooperation of religious communities (Ferrari 2013).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, it should be noted that in various cases of non-confessional RE, institutional documents often explicitly attribute a special status to Christianity, especially in terms of cultural heritage.<sup>7</sup>

This last observation shows how a classification from an institutional perspective does not depict entirely the differences or exhaust the peculiarities of the various types of RE. Shifting the criteria, for example, from the legal framework to baseline educational aims, curricular contents or actual practices, we can have different classifications of RE, which also highlights the reasons why even supposedly non-confessional RE should be critically reconsidered.

One of the most used classifications (originally proposed in Grimmitt 1973, cf. *inter alia* Giorda, Saggioro 2011, 131-2, 178-9) refers to the basic educational strategy of RE, which may be divided into three main orientations: ‘learning into religion’, ‘learning from religion’

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**5** In the context of Europe, for example, this is the case of Portugal, the Netherlands, Poland, Austria, Belgium, Spain, Latvia, Luxembourg, and Italy. In these cases, there is often one or a few more historically predominant traditions actually taught in schools, e.g. Catholicism in Italy, Spain and Poland, while other institutionally recognized religions may be taught upon various conditions depending on the country (official request, number of applicants, willingness of the religious community to cover expenses, etc.). In historically bi-confessional countries, such as Germany, the two predominant trends of Catholicism and Protestantism are often taught in an ecumenical modality (Willaime 2007, 60; Ferrari 2013, 101).

**6** This is the case of England and Northern European protestant countries such as Sweden and Denmark (Willaime 2007, 61; Ferrari 2013, 100). A notable exception is represented by the German Land of Brandenburg (Alberts 2007, 337 ff.) and recently also by Switzerland.

**7** Concerning England, cf. *infra*, ch. 4; concerning Sweden cf. Alberts 2007, 211 ff. and Berglund, 2013. For Denmark cf. Jensen, Kjeldsen 2013, and Andreassen 2013 for Norway.

and ‘learning about religion’.<sup>8</sup> The first one often overlaps with the confessional institutional framework and aims to introduce the pupils to the self-understanding of a religious tradition, focusing on doctrinal matters and employing a theological perspective. With ‘learning about religion’ the aim is instead to have the pupils develop a factual knowledge of a certain tradition, usually from an academic, non-confessional perspective. ‘Learning from religion’ is a more ambiguous concept, that will be often critically discussed in this work, and can be generally understood as enabling pupils to personally reflect, especially for what concerns existential, metaphysical or ethical questions, on the basis of various issues brought forth by the doctrines or practices of the religious traditions under examination.

Indeed, Frank and Bochinger (2008) delineate more starkly the critical ambiguity of having a ‘middle term’ between confessional and non-confessional RE approach. On the base of their fieldwork in Switzerland, they distinguish three main forms of RE practice: “dogma-related RE”, “life-world-related RE” and “Culture studies-related RE”. In the first case, an object of teaching-learning (e.g. the concept of ‘God’) has none or little ‘framing’, in the sense that the idea of ‘God’ is engaged with a nearly univocal and exclusive frame, i.e. the context of Christian tradition or even a narrower context of Protestant tradition, so that pupils have little possibility of thinking about the concept of ‘God’ from other perspectives. Actors in this kind of teaching-learning process tend to speak from a “we-position”; which is reflected in the fact that ultimately pupils are supposed to repeat a dogmatic interpretation which is considered valid for all pupils, hence (‘we’). In “life-world-related RE” the objects of teaching-learning are framed within the pupils’ life-world<sup>9</sup> experiences and/or in some anthropological universalistic assumptions such as the postulation of a ‘common religiousness’ in every human being. In this case discourses employ a ‘you-position’ (I would add also an ‘I-position’) in the sense that the pupils are personally engaged and asked, for example, to express their idea of ‘God’ through words or drawings. Here, differently to the first form, the object is distinguished from its framings (which differs from pupil to pupil). However, pupils work only with their frames or at least they are presented with just their classmates’ frames. Frank and Bochinger observe

<sup>8</sup> It must be noted that these three ideal types do not have to be mutually exclusive: as we will see in ch. 4, English RE has always been trying to balance between ‘learning about’ and ‘learning from’. Also, even instances of institutionally confessional-RE may aim to offer knowledge about other religions, albeit with the high risk of applying theological filters.

<sup>9</sup> Frank and Bochinger (2009, 198 fn. 21) draw this concept from Alfred Schütz’s (1899-1959) theory of *Lebenswelt* in the sense of a pre-theoretical, naïve or everyday apprehension of the world that shapes our “natural attitude to it”; cf. Dreher 2011.

that there are, nonetheless, some similarities to the “dogma-related RE” practices, since very often teachers that employ the “life-world-related RE” approach presuppose that all humans have a basic religious orientation. In other words, they assume that every religious symbol can be meaningfully linked to the inner-world of pupils, who can thus express themselves through these symbols. Therefore, for Frank and Bochinger, the first two forms are more akin one to another and pertain to more general religious teaching (*religiöser Unterricht*). What pertains instead to the teaching of knowledge about religions (*religionskundlicher Unterricht*) is the last “Culture studies-related RE” form, in which the discourses employ a ‘they-position’. This entails, among other things, that not every religious object is meaningful for everyone. Instead, by comparing, for example, different narratives from religious traditions or different lifestyles of religious persons, teachers guide pupils to create a more general framing, such as the analytical concept of “the theory of cosmogony and anthropogony” (202). Alternatively, teachers may offer the social or historical context as frames to be inserted or studied, e.g. the relevance of a religious building.

Jensen and Kjeldsen (2013) cast an even more suspicious eye on REs that institutionally self-define themselves as non-confessional and propose two classifications: “Capital-C Confessional RE” and “small-c confessional RE”. While the first is rather self-explanatory, and refers to standard denominational teachings, the latter indicates those REs which, albeit formally dissociated from specific religious traditions, continue to be based on a “religious understanding of religion”, in the sense of “having the explicit or implicit aim of promoting (some kind of) religion, or religion-based values in general” (Jensen, Kjeldsen 2013, 188). For example, they detect this kind of RE within the Danish curricula and syllabi of the *Folkeskole* (compulsory schooling from the age of 6 to 16). They show how there is a clear influence of “Christian theological philosophy-of-life traditions” or of cultural-national essentialist discourses which posit the Danish version of Lutheranism as compatible with a secular democratic state because it is primarily made up of ‘morals’, ‘faith’, ‘culture’ or ‘cultural heritage’. Furthermore, this Lutheranism is positively contrasted with other ‘less modern’ traditions, notably Islam (195-200).

Jensen is equally skeptical of another prominent type of RE (2017a, 54-8). He calls it “interreligious (or Intercultural or Multicultural) RE”, which presents itself as “a special kind of response to the changes in or towards new kinds of religious pluralism” (54). As a matter of fact, this ‘dimension’ or ‘function’ of RE is highly stressed especially in those various supranational projects and recommendations published since 09/11 which promote educational policies aimed at fostering mutual tolerance, respect and understanding between different religions and beliefs in an increasingly plural world (cf. Jack-

son 2008a). In general, from the point of view of contents and educational aims, in this “Interreligious/Intercultural/Multicultural” modality of RE, religions are seen as a pivotal element in the definition of the identities of the pupils. This kind of RE is supposed to support the development of said identities within a framework of respect for human rights, and to foster the social/cultural inclusion of various cultural and religious groups (and the individuals therein). Therefore, the common educational strategies of this kind of RE include not only exposing pupils to a variety of various religious traditions, but also developing ‘dialogical’ skills, so that pupils may not only learn *about* different religions, but also learn *from* different religions, possibly directly from classmates and possibly in relation to themes of public interest such as justice or world peace. One example of this RE is the so-called ‘Hamburg Model’ in Germany, which focuses on having pupils debate between different religious/ideological positions, with the aim of constructively comparing and contrasting different views, especially concerning themes such as social justice, peace and human rights (cf. Jackson 2004, 114-17; Alberts 2007, 332-5). The degree in which such “Interreligious/Intercultural/Multicultural” may be classified as secular, or as “Capital-C Confessional RE” or as “small-c confessional RE”, depends on the actual practices and contents (Jensen 2017a, 54). At any rate, it must be noted that in prominent examples of this kind of RE, such as the above-mentioned Hamburg Model, while it is acknowledged that “there will be different claims to truth which cannot be reduced simplistically to ‘common ground’” and “situations of unsettled differences” (Jackson 2004, 117), this supposedly neutral intercultural/interreligious model easily slips into a theological frame that assumes that “all religions are ‘incomplete’” and that “all people are children of God” (116), thus indicating that this RE falls under the “small-c confessional RE” or even “Capital-C Confessional RE”.

This blurring between confessional and non-confessional RE can be sided with the fact that, at least in the European situation, confessional RE is still predominant. A quick glance at the work of Davis, Miroshnikova and Mudd (2013) reveal that 16 out of the 22 European countries examined belong to the confessional category. This fact considerably effects the educational research in RE in general, including the allegedly non-confessional ones. Both in individual national contexts, as well as in comparative and transnational perspectives, many studies explore topics that do not eschew theological, or generally religious agenda in education. Some examples are the formation of religious identities in pupils and their agency in this regard (Smyth, Lyons, Darmody 2013), or the role of interreligious dialogue in showing how the

creeds and holy books of the world's religions teach about spiritual systems that reject violence and the individualistic pursuit of economic and political gain, and call their followers to compassion for every human being. (Engebretson et al. 2010, V)

In general, scholars justify their interest in approaching in such ways the 'religious', 'moral' and 'spiritual' dimensions of education by claiming that

it has emerged a strong and vital interest in human religiosity, spirituality and values, and many are searching for meaning both within and without religious traditions today to seek answers to ethical and moral questions that have been generated by the knowledge and technological explosion. (De Souza et al. 2009, XV)

The present work begs to differ from such approaches to RE and inscribe itself in the fairly novel field of RE studies based on the academic study of religion(s) (hereafter SoR). Interestingly enough, the academic study of religion(s) only recently began to inquire into the field of RE. In the European context, within the EASR (European Association for the Study of Religions)<sup>10</sup> the Working Group on Religion in Public Education was established in 2007. This relatively new sub-field distinguishes itself "from other existing networks and organisations dealing with religious education (RE) in Europe at various levels and in various ways",<sup>11</sup> and is devoted to two strands of research. The first one is a more customary descriptive approach, i.e. aimed at reaching conclusions of interpretative, historical, or taxonomical nature. Their scopes, however, are quite variegated: studies in this regards concern e.g. politics of identitarian discourses in RE (Jensen, Kjeldsen 2013), socio-historical contextualization of RE (Giorda 2015), representations of religions in textbooks (Andreassen, Lewis 2014) or RE and minority religions (Berglund 2017). A good deal of research focuses on historical development and classification of various RE models, both from the point of view of institutional frameworks (Pajer 2014; 2017) and of actual practices (Frank, Bochinger 2008) or both (Jensen 2017a).

Along with these more descriptive works, the second strand comprises works that have an explicit normative bend and push forward

<sup>10</sup> Cf. <http://easr.info/easr-working-groups/public-education/>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.easr.eu/easr-working-groups/public-education/about-the-group/>. These other groups are, for example, the European Network for Religious Education in Europe through Contextual Approaches (ENRECA), the European Forum for Teachers of Religious Education (EFTRE) and European Forum for Religious Education in Schools (EuFRES).

the conceptualization and development of SoR-based RE didactics.<sup>12</sup> These SoR-based normative works represent quite a novelty in the gamut of similar research in RE, and differ from the other, not SoR-based approaches. First, they adopt an explicit a-religious stance, in the sense that they are not pro- nor anti-religions, also in the sense that they address every type of learner, irrespectively of their possible religious belonging, anti-religious attitude or indifference. Second, they have a painstakingly problematic approach to the concept of religion in itself. For example, the focus on the inner, moral, 'spiritual' dimension of religion is considered too limited and too tied to a modern, Protestant view of religion. Therefore, this kind of research, instead of focusing on the development of the religious identity of the learners, is more interested in providing knowledge and critical tools in order to cope with the present-day situation of religious and cultural plurality.

This is the perspective that I adopt in the present work and that will be developed and discussed in depth throughout the chapters. The present work aims in fact to investigate the topic of how to teach Japanese and other Asian religious traditions in the context of non-confessional RE as a state-managed subject in public schools. This means asking which developments, adjustments or enrichments may be recommended to former research and models, especially the established non-confessional RE. More in detail, this work aims to produce a baseline theoretical framework which systematically analyses and develops the various relevant implications that the theme of Japanese and other Asian religious traditions, as approached from the perspective of the study of religion\,s, may bring to the scholarly debate over non-confessional RE.

As stated at the onset of this chapter, the present-day global relevance of Japanese and other Asian religious traditions is inextricable from the historical dynamics of the constructions of self- and hetero-representations of cultural identities among different social groups and civilizations. Such dynamics developed especially during the construction of the modern international order, in which practices, discourses and politics of religion played a remarkable role. In other words, the value in the study of Japanese and other Asian religious traditions does not necessarily limit itself to the epistemological reconsideration on how to study religions, but can contribute to the RE debate in general, and to the SoR-based RE in particular, also within the dimension of intercultural and citizenship education. As a matter of fact, the SoR-based RE proposes itself first and fore-

<sup>12</sup> Alberts 2007; 2008; 2017b; Jensen 2008; 2019; 2020; Giorda, Saggiaro 2011; Giorda 2012; Frank 2013; 2016; Frank, Bleish 2017; Meylan 2015; Kjeldsen 2019; Danish, Cush 2020. It goes without saying that often the conclusions of normative studies are grounded and substantiated by accompanying descriptive analyses.

most as being the most neutral and self-critical perspective possible in a society characterized by increasing religious, anti-religious and a-religious plurality. Therefore, the issue of how to communicate, understand and coexist with persons with different horizons of reference, at various levels of communities (local, national, global), becomes logically a primary issue for this kind of RE. Intercultural and citizenship education is not only acknowledged in the field of SoR-based RE (cf. Alberts 2007, 74-83, 355-66; Giorda, Saggioro 2011, 170 ff.), but is a key topic also in non-confessional RE in general (cf. Jackson 2003; 2004).

Furthermore, the importance of the relationships between RE, intercultural dialogue and intercultural education is highlighted in several studies and recommendations from a supranational/institutional level. The influential *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue*, issued in 2008 by the Council of Europe (hereafter, CoE), states that the teaching of “religious and convictional facts”, along with history and language education, are perhaps among the most relevant subjects in the intercultural field, so that one may “understand religions and beliefs and avoid prejudice” (CoE 2008a, 30-1). It recommends that

appreciation of our diverse cultural backgrounds should include knowledge and understanding of the major world religions and nonreligious convictions and their role in society. (43)

Similarly, the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (OSCE/ODIHR 2007) justifies its recommendations on the grounds that teaching about religions and beliefs is an “essential part of a quality education”, that “fosters democratic citizenship”, “promotes understanding of societal diversity”, and helps in “broadening one’s cultural horizons and in deepening one’s insight into the complexities of past and present” (76). Along these lines, other studies and practical guidelines have been published by the CoE, such as *Religious Diversity and Intercultural Education: A Reference Book for Schools* (CoE 2007) and *Signposts: Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-Religious Worldviews in Intercultural Education* (CoE 2014). Accordingly, I will explore the relevance of the theme Japan and other Asian religious traditions in RE with particular consideration of those educational aims characterizable as critical, intercultural (UNESCO 2013) and democratic culture education (CoE 2018a).

In summary, this study would like to contribute also to the incipient SoR-based RE normative studies, as it further corroborates their underlying principles, focuses more in detail on their aims, and adds new perspectives, while being receptive of supra-national recommendations and discourses concerning the general topic of interculturality and critical thinking.

To date, an attempt to build a comprehensive and systematic approach to the teaching of East-Asian religions (not to mention Japanese religions in particular) in public schools, from the standpoint of the academic study of religion\,s, and with the aim of fostering intercultural and citizenship competence, is still somehow missing. A number of works offering guidance on teaching Asian religions have been published, but they refer to university and college level (e.g. Richey 2008; Lewis, De Angelis 2017). While providing insightful clues and practical examples, they are nonetheless limited by being collections of individual essays which focus on very particular and specific contexts, sometimes tangential to the overall field of the study of religion\,s, such as teaching Buddhism as philosophy (Siderits 2017) or, even more specifically, teaching Yogācāra Buddhism using cognitive science (Waldron 2017). Certain essays, while focused on a certain topic, are surely of relevance for a more general discussion on teaching East-Asian religions. For example, they argue for the need to rethink the teaching of Zen Buddhism (Heine 2017) given its relevance in contemporary common culture, or engage with the general question of whether or not Confucianism is a religion (Berthrong, Richey 2008). Others focus on too specific topics, such as the Mencius-Xunzi debate in early Confucian ethics (Stalnaker 2008). On the other hand, there have been contributions also about the actual practice of teaching East-Asian religions in public school (and in higher education as well). However, they consist of insightful but not systematic articles which provide practical tips, hints, and example of good practices in disparate and very specific topics, which often refer to global history classes and rarely deal with intercultural issues. The only work in my knowledge that argues that the topic of East-Asian religions should be engaged in RE with the precise aim of overcoming outdated, reified and Eurocentric treatment of the topic of religion is the essay by Cush and Robinson (2020). It is very aligned with the perspective of this work, as it critically asks whether the concept of religion in popular, academic and adherents' usage is helpful when applied to East-Asian traditions. Problems include the homogenization of diversity, unnatural separations between traditions and the influence of modern Euro-American thought and power. However, its limited space does not explore in detail the practical implications in a didactic and educational sense.

## 1.2 The Usage, Meanings and Reasons for Addressing 'Japanese and Other Asian Religious Traditions'

In strong continuity with the critical and interculturally-sensitive scholarly background above illustrated, in the present work the use of terms such as 'Japanese', 'Chinese' or more in general 'East and South-Asian religious traditions' is to be better understood as the religious traditions which *historically* originated in a more or less circumscribed spatial region, be it Japan or the eastern parts of the Asian continent. This is meant to imply several issues worth discussing before continuing.

First, I want to avoid a distinction between a 'Western' world, characterized only by three Abrahamic monotheisms, and an 'Eastern' world in which these latter traditions never took hold (which is historically inaccurate). In other words, I acknowledge the historical presence and cultural rooting of the monotheisms in Asia (cf. e.g. Csordas, Kurian 2015; Wormser 2015; Chong, Goh 2015) but it will not be my focus.

Secondly, I use the term 'tradition' as an interpretive category that implies a complex of "power, agency, authority, rhetoric, ideology, community, temporality, memory, continuity, innovation, identity" (Engler 2005, 358). I do not imply therefore a dichotomy and contrast with 'modernity', but I use the term 'tradition' as a heuristic shorthand to indicate a (complex) process of selectively and creatively handing down to the next generation a "repertoire of resources" that are "variously used by individuals negotiating their lives" (Adler 2014, 11; Company 2003, 317 ff.). Thirdly, by using both particular (Japan, China or India) and general (East/South Asia) geo-spatial indication, I want to emphasize the transcultural dynamics of religious traditions. In other words, albeit their initial point of diffusion or development can be pinpointed to certain historical and geographical coordinates, one should also consider the cultural fluxes throughout the whole Asian region (e.g. the transmission of tantric practices, cf. *infra*, § 3.2.3). This prevents us from assigning to the religious traditions nowadays present in modern national states a peculiar character exclusive only to those states. When considering e.g. Japanese or Chinese religions, especially in pre-modern context, I am referring to cultural phenomena originating from or taking place in regions which today are defined by certain national borders. However, I do this without assuming any essential or immutable links that bind the character of those traditions to their regions of origins, nor to the regions of their historical presence.

Lastly, by referring to these traditions as 'historically originated', I emphasize the importance of the dynamics of global spreading and acculturation of these religions in various parts of the worlds, especially Europe and North America.

These last two points necessitate I explain the choice of the theme of 'Japanese *and* other Asian religious traditions'. While Japan will be a privileged case study among Asian traditions, it cannot be considered as unrelated or as a seemingly exceptional case from its larger geographical and historical context. In other words, it would be misleading to examine Japan without considering not only other traditions pertaining to its supposed area of belonging, i.e. East-Asia (with China and Korea), but also traditions said to pertain to South Asia (India, Sri Lanka, etc.) and even to Southeast Asia (Myanmar, Thailand, etc.). This holds especially true when investigating the modern and contemporary relationships between Japan and the Euro-American contexts concerning discourses and practices about 'religion'.

There are several reasons for adopting this approach. To start with, to focus exclusively on Japan implies a methodological nationalism and a subdivision of the world in supposedly homogeneous areas, which have been criticized under many aspects. From a theoretical point of view, to focus only on what happens within (modern) national border is to assume without support that a nation is a natural unit of analysis, and the contained culture and society are homogeneously enough to be considered as a whole (Wimmer, Schiller 2003). From a genealogical point of view, the subdivision in national or supranational areas such as East-Asia or Northern Africa reflects an idea of an international order born within Europe and then projected onto the 'rest' for purposes of both epistemological and political control (Sakai, Walker 2019). As Sakai and Walker argue, the articulation of the world as divided in commensurable (stable, homogenous, sovereign, mutually recognized) areas begin with the Treaty of Westphalia (1648). Being in the first phase of the colonial era, such articulation was predicated on the basic differentiation between Europe, which were now characterized by commensurable areas (i.e. embryos of modern nation-states), and the 'rest' which was not commensurable and thus open to (exotic) study, control and subjugation. Indeed, this heritage can be seen in the fact that a great deal of the postwar developments of the field called 'area studies', especially in the US, has been linked to the necessity of supporting a strategic political (and even military) positioning in the global landscape. The world is thus divided in national states belonging to certain areas, to be studied/surveilled and, when needed, recalled to commensurability with nation-building or military measures (Sakai, Walker 2019, 1-4, 11-19). At the same time, societies which were inserted in this international grid actively internalized its principles and sought to homogenize its internal characteristics (cultural and linguistic traits *in primis*) and define itself as different from both the 'West' and other neighbouring regions, as it has been in the case of Japan (cf. e.g. Morris-Suzuki 1998). This approach based on nation-states, in turn, greatly influenced and still linger in many historical accounts of Japan, of both autochthonous or foreign authorship,

in which the main task of the historian is to rank the position of the nations on a scale of progress, development or power, and explain the reasons for their ranking. (Morris-Suzuki 2020, 200-18)

Methodological nationalism is thus rightly eschewed in more sound studies, which highlight the multi-lateral interaction of the area, focusing on what Barnes calls the “Yellow Sea Interaction Sphere” (Barnes 2015), also when a circumscribed theme and area are under scrutiny, such as Buddhism and other religions in Japan (cf. e.g. Deal, Ruppert 2015, 15-17; Deal 2019). However, one should not commit the opposite mistake of subsuming a region in its larger area of reference by postulating some important *shared* traits (e.g. rice culture, or, more in line with our discussion, Confucianism and Buddhism) as the *fundamental and constant* traits with the highest explicative power. In this way methodological nationalism simply expands and posits equally artificially, crated boundaries such as those separating Est Asia from South Asia or even Eastern Europe (Morris-Suzuki 2020, 13-14). To avoid essentializing and naturalizing both the ‘nation’ and the ‘area’, new approaches to area studies suggest that

the determination of area depends on its relevance for the research theme chosen, and can have any size, location or temporality. (Houben 2017, 202)

Such input is especially welcomed when we need to consider the dynamics of self- and hetero-representations between Japan and Euro-America regions concerning discourses and practices related to ‘religion’. In conformity with the fundamental euro-centric assumption dividing the ‘West’ and the ‘East’, Japanese religions have been historically engaged and interpreted by the ‘West’ within a context wider than China and Korea, including notably India and the Southeast regions, especially for what concerns *theravāda* Buddhism (cf. *infra*, § 3.3). Similarly, also Japanese religious leaders and thinkers, when confronting modern hegemonic discourses on ‘religion’, had to relate themselves with the putative areas of origin of their traditions. This is what Suzuki Daisetsu did when he entertained relations with Chinese Buddhism reformers and scholars (Li 2020). Several Buddhist monks and scholars went even beyond, and felt the need to reconnect their traditions to the ‘original’ Indian, Sanskrit/Pāli origin (Stortini 2015; 2020).

A last, more ‘practical’ reason to discuss Japanese religious traditions together with other Asian traditions lies in the fact that the examples of RE discussed and criticized in ch. 4 barely touch the topic of Japan and give more space to Hinduism or Buddhism in general. If I want to argue that the theme of Japanese religions represents a fruitful occasion for criticism and deconstruction of the approach

that such RE models adopt towards East-Asian traditions in general (and beyond), I cannot limit myself in addressing exclusively Japan. Not only would it be an implicit endorsement of the modern rhetoric of Japanese uniqueness, but, more importantly, I need to consider how themes and traits found in Japanese traditions resound and connect with other areas commonly referred to as ‘the East’, without positing a fundamental, immutable essence of such an area.

### 1.3 Logic and Structure of the Argument

#### 1.3.1 The Three Theoretical Baselines

It should be clear by now that the present inquiry has a fairly interdisciplinary character, as it aims to weave together issues pertaining to those fields usually called ‘educational sciences’, ‘area studies’ and, of course, ‘religious studies’. Concerning the latter, however, the present work will use the term ‘study of religion\s’ as it reflects better the contemporary self-definition of the field (Stausberg, Engler 2011; 2016) and also because of the inherent ambiguity of the term ‘religious studies’ which often encompasses research enterprises whose epistemic goals are not fully scientific nor neutral (cf. Weibe 2005). For what concerns the field of area studies, the previous section warns us of the dangers of assuming it as a bounded theoretical field on its own. Instead, one of the aims of this work is to show and exploit the fruitful connection between the theoretical study of religion\s and the study of religions in Japan and other Asian religions. What needs peculiar treatment is the field of educational sciences, which we will engage in two of its subfields, didactics and intercultural education. Thus, the three theoretical baselines of the present work become the following.

First, since we want to rethink RE by capitalizing on the rethinking process of the field of the study of religion\s, we need to start from the theoretical premises of this field. This latter is characterized by one, or rather two closely interrelated objects of research, which are expressed by the idiosyncratic use of the backlash in the term ‘religion\s’. The first is ‘religion’ as a conceptually constructed object of theoretical reflection, the second is ‘religions’, i.e. those phenomena whose identification and scientific treatment is closely linked to the nature of the theoretical construct of reference (cf. Stausberg 2010). As it will be detailed in the next chapter, during its development this academic enterprise has taken pains, on one hand, to strip itself of explicit and implicit theological or religionist influences, such as the *sui generis* interpretation, i.e. that religion can be understood only from a unique and peculiar perspective. Instead, it critically reflected on the universal applicability of the term ‘reli-

gion' and on the power implications of such use. On the other hand, it strived and is still striving to identify a research object, avoiding both a *sui generis* and mono-reductionist approach, so that this very enterprise can be justified as academic enquiry towards an important element of human culture, which is at the same time both elusive and taken for granted. Indeed, two main trends can be identified within it (Schilbrack 2018), to be best approached as the two ends of a single spectrum.

On the 'deconstructive' end, investigations into the history, genealogies and implications of the very idea of 'religion' undermined its understanding as a clear, distinct, if not altogether autonomous and universal sphere of human reality, separated from the domains of power or politics. On the ground that the present-day concept of 'religion' developed within a precise historical and geographical context - i.e. modern, Christian (Protestant) Europe - in the form of dialectical 'counterpart' to modern statecraft, scholars belonging to this trend criticize the naturalization of the idea of religion and its use as a universal category, in particular when it has been applied in extra-European regions as a way to assess their cultural backwardness and thereby justifying their colonial exploitation.

On the 'constructive' end, while recognizing the historical and non-universal character of the concept of 'religion', this is still considered to be a valid theoretical tool to identify and analyze different phenomena distant in time and space. This perspective is grounded on the awareness that it is fundamentally impossible to completely dispense with any kind of theory of reference. Not only when interpreting data, but also in order to identify the relevant data, one cannot help but to refer to some sort of theory, even implicitly. By employing different definitions and theoretical configurations, such as functional or substantial criteria, family-resemblance approaches or polythetic definitions, scholars of this trend highlight the intrinsic plurality and complexity of its object(s), and the need to review the theoretical and analytical tools of this field constantly and critically.

The present research is positioned somewhat in the middle of the spectrum. The concept of religion is not abandoned, but both its heuristic and problematic dimensions are emphasized. Starting from the idea that there is no epistemological perspective that is absolutely transcendental to its context, it argues that maintaining the concept of religion, with all its historical background (including the theoretical debates about it), can be useful in various ways, especially in conjunction with the other two theoretical baselines, which come from the fields of didactics and intercultural education.

Since we are engaging with the topic of RE as a school subject, this brings us to the topic of teaching-learning, which is the object of the field of didactics. This discipline combines investigations and reflec-

tions on what it is and what it means to teach and learn (descriptive approach), with research on what must be done in order to achieve it at its best (normative approach) (Perla 2013). Teaching-learning, as an object of research, is composite: it is a teaching-learning of something, to certain recipients, in certain contexts, in certain modalities, and with certain goals (Baldacci 2013). In the present work, we refer especially to the sub-field of disciplinary didactics, that is, the teaching of socially and institutionally recognized knowledge, or ‘discipline’. Indeed, following the trend of SoR-based normative research, we posit as the object of RE’s teaching-learning the above cited disciplinary field of the study of religion\’s. In disciplinary didactics, a pivotal role is played by the theory of didactic transposition (Chevallard 1985). It features both theoretical and practical dimensions and has both descriptive and normative aims, investigating the contexts, the purposes, and the modalities in which a certain piece of knowledge is transformed first into knowledge *taught*, and then into knowledge *learned*. As Develay (1996) has argued, in any process of didactic transposition there is an axiological component. That is, the underlying reasons and aims of teaching something, as well as the social practices taken as reference when reflecting on the societal impact, in terms of knowledge and competences<sup>13</sup> fostered, of the knowledge taught in the form of a school subject. In other words, teaching-learning exceeds the limits of school environment in being also a step towards the formation of the person, not only within the horizon of values defined by society, but also in a prospect of an improvement of the latter.

This brings us to the issue of the third theoretical baseline, that is, the educational framework in the broad sense in which we posit our research endeavor. As hinted above, the chosen framework pertains to what I may preliminarily and loosely label ‘intercultural citizenship education’. As it will be demonstrated in the following chapters, I argue that this framework fruitfully combines with the themes and aims of a Sdr-based RE, especially when it tackles the topic of Japanese and other Asian religions. The starting motivation is, as anticipated above, that such a topic has revealed itself, in the field of the study of religion\’s, as an useful chance to foreground complexities, mechanisms of mutual (self-)representations, dynamics of influences and differentiations in lieu of uniform explanations, simplistic and separating categorizations, and undue projection upon others of native concepts and ideals.

Indeed, with ‘intercultural citizenship education’ we identify composite bodies of theories and practices revolving around a common theme: coexistence, on a global as well as on a local scale. Despite

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**13** In this study I adopt the idiosyncratic use in plural form of this uncountable noun, as attested in widely disseminated studies and documents such as UNESCO 2013 and CoE 2018.

their heterogeneity, there are some shared key theoretical points, which are of interest to our discussion. Basically, it is assumed that people, material and symbolic goods, knowledge and technologies, and information have constantly been in motion, through space and time. Nowadays, technical progresses increasingly facilitate such exchanges. Consequently, it is more correct to apply a dynamic and complex concept of culture. Groups, individuals and their social, cultural, material productions are no longer considered to be separated elements, but they should be interpreted as ‘nodes’ within combined flows of knowledge, symbols, materials, technologies and people. Cultural phenomena, both on a small and large scale, are not born *ex vacuo* but are the result of shifts, transformations, adaptations, negotiations and re-elaborations. From a certain point of view, the human being is *naturaliter* intercultural (cf. e.g. Burke 2009). Barriers and boundaries, whether physical or symbolic, as well as identity dynamics, are considered equally mobile and fluid over time, but this does not make them any less effective in conditioning social, cultural and political environments. Interests and inequalities of power of various kinds (political, economic, epistemological) and at various levels (local, regional, global) are key influences on such flows, re-elaborations and the related constructions of barriers, boundaries and identity dynamics (cf. Hardy, Hussain 2017).

In this situation, intercultural education aims to ‘steer’ these intercultural dynamics towards positive results, such as peaceful co-existence, resolution or non-violent management of conflicts, mutual enrichment, elimination of inequalities, sharing and interest in issues of a global nature. By contrast, it aims to avoid unwanted outcomes such as: disinterest/ignorance/fear for what is perceived as different; construction of physical and symbolic boundaries; inequality; stereotypes; prejudice; hate speech, and so on. Practical measures to reach such goals range from *ad hoc* educational activities to broad general frameworks for implementing educational policies and practices. Often scholars and practitioners indicate sets of competences considered pivotal for understanding and acting in an inherently complex and intercultural world, as described above (cf. e.g. Portera 2013, 163-83). These competences are meant to work as goals and benchmarks to both educational practices and policies. Often, along with these competences, there is the identification of values/assumptions that can serve as a minimum common base for intercultural exchange. Usually, these values are identified in human rights, in other situations they are accompanied by values such as democracy and the rule of law. The problematic nature of this need for a minimum common denominator is recognized and connects with the basic intercultural education principle of cultural relativism, namely, that the values and norms of a given culture cannot be the basis from which to judge cultures. However, this does not imply a discourse of abso-

lute moral relativism or ‘anything goes’, but should instead be the starting point from which to seriously address the problematic tension between the preservation of diversity and a search for a common frame of reference, e.g. human rights.

### 1.3.2 Synopsis of the Next Chapters

The argument of this work will unfold in the following way: in ch. 2 we will develop and set up the theoretical and analytical framework which will guide the investigation in subsequent chapters. As already stated above, in order to rethink RE, one must define first the disciplinary fields of reference concerning the two key aspects of RE, that is, ‘religion’ and ‘education’.

Concerning the former, both the ‘constructive’ and ‘deconstructive’ approaches to the study of religion will be examined in detail, dividing the discussion in three key aspects of 1) definitions of religion\, 2) epistemologies of religion\, and 3) representations of religion\,s. I will argue that, for our purposes, both trends can be fruitfully adopted, also in the light of the fact that they still share many common points in their basic research methodology.

Concerning the ‘education’ aspect, after a sketchy exploration of the various layers of meaning of this word, framed in a sort of dichotomy between ‘didactics’ and ‘pedagogy’,<sup>14</sup> we will focus on the fields of disciplinary didactics and, in particular, of didactic transposition. This latter will be explored in its four dimensions, that of 1) epistemology, or how the knowledge is adapted; 2) teaching, or how it is transmitted; 3) learning, or how it is received; and 4) axiology, or which values govern such process. In connection to axiology, intercultural education will be discussed, focusing on how and why the above hinted concept of complex culture is operatively linked with other issues, such as intercultural interaction, aims of intercultural educations and the possible risk one runs when engaging discourses of ‘interculturality’ without a sufficiently critical stance.

In ch. 3 the theme of Japanese and East-Asian religious traditions will be engaged, following and deepening some key theoretical is-

<sup>14</sup> As a terminological note, I will follow the continental distinction of didactics from pedagogy, in which the former may be defined as “a discourse consisting, on one hand, of reflections on devices, techniques, and artifacts that make teaching and learning activity effective, and, on the other hand, of reflection on normative values (i.e. on aims) that guide the choice towards those devices, techniques and artifacts” (Perla 2013, 8), while the latter is understood as a broader discipline focused on the upbringing of the individual as fulfilled person and member of society. The Anglo-Saxon usage tends to conflate both ideas under the single term ‘pedagogy/pedagogies’ or refer to didactics as ‘pedagogy’ and to pedagogy as ‘educational theory’ (cf. Hamilton 1999; Bertrand, Houssaye 1999).

sues delineated in ch. 2, especially those highlighted by the critical/deconstructive approach in the study of religion\s. I will focus on those aspects that represent a challenge in respect to certain commonsensical, ingrained ways of thinking about religion in general, and about Japanese and East-Asian religions in particular. More in detail, these challenges can be divided in two groups. The first refer to the heritage of Eurocentric/Christian-centric epistemologies of religions, i.e. the tendency to emphasize or select certain aspects, while neglecting others that would be equally – if not more – relevant to the conception and representation of the religious traditions under examination. The second group of challenges is linked to the previous ones but has a more historical perspective. It concerns the legacy of modernity and coloniality, and basically address the following key-problem: when addressing the present-day situation of Japanese and other East-Asian religious traditions, one cannot avoid considering the historical influence of modern Euro-American paradigms, which were built on binary oppositions such as secularity/religion, religious/superstitions, rational/irrational, spiritual/material, and so on. It was around these paradigms that a series of both hetero- and self-representations of East-Asian religions and cultures historically developed, intimately linked to self-representations of Euro-American societies themselves. I define these stratified representations as an impactful cultural repertoire that must be duly reckoned with.

Ch. 4 will be devoted to the analysis and evaluation of our case study in RE, which is represented by the English example, which, as will be shortly explained, is one of the most historically developed, influent and acknowledged examples in Europe of ‘non-confessional’ RE. More specifically, among the high number of different models and approaches of RE, six authors will be selected and analyzed in detail, whose works I have classified under three categories: ‘Interpretative-dialogical’, ‘Rational-theological’ and ‘Existential-instrumental’. Through the application of an analytical grid set up by drawing insights from ch. 2, and by contrasting with the topics discussed in ch. 3, it will become clear why I put ‘non-confessional’ in inverted commas. Indeed, the various theories and practices of English RE, while presenting themselves as non-confessional, and generally acknowledging the role of the study of religion\s in the make-up of RE, will nonetheless show many elements falling outside the disciplinary scope of the academic study of religion\s. Moreover, in relation to the issue of Japanese and other East-Asian religions, many critical issues in both epistemological and educational terms will come to the fore.

In the conclusive ch. 5, we will get back to the insights gained in ch. 2 to lay out a framework in which to take stock, in a more systemic way, of what has been explored previously. I will discuss the insights from previous chapters together with the conclusion and recommendations concerning the development of SoR-based RE di-

dactics made by other scholars in the field. By doing so, the aim of this chapter will be twofold. The first will be to delineate the contours of the relevance of the theme of Japanese and East-Asian religions within the debate of non-confessional RE. This will further strengthen the claims of SoR-based RE scholars who argue that it is also necessary to keep being critically watchful in regard to putative 'non-confessional' RE. The second will be to produce a 'model' for the didactics of Japanese as well as other East-Asian religions. Such a 'model' is not meant to be a rigid operative scheme or a comprehensive theory. It aims to offer an orientational map of interconnected key points, both theoretical and practical, articulated at various levels: axiological/educative, epistemological, teaching-oriented and learning-oriented.