Globalization and Asian Religions in the Scuola di Meditazione

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**Abstract**

This article explores the Scuola di Meditazione (School of Meditation) established in Sardinia in 1983, one of the earliest instances in Italy of the use of ‘Eastern’ techniques by Roman Catholic religious professionals to promote the practice of meditation for lay people. Against the backdrop of ongoing religious diversification in the Italian context, this case study provides an insight on religion under globalization as a complex and multilayered phenomenon. In particular, the formation and activities of the Scuola di Meditazione show to be ingrained in the working of the global cultural network, with both direct and indirect cultural imports from Asia through mediatization, missionization, and mobility; to build upon the broader global repositioning of the Roman Catholic Church towards Asian and other ‘world’ religions through the adoption of a soft inclusivist approach; and to provide a meaningful framework for glocal practices resulting in the globally-oriented reshaping of individual religious worlds.

**Keywords**

Asian religions – meditation – Roman Catholic Church – religion in Italy – globalization

1 **Introduction**

Following a general trend in Europe, Italy is experiencing an increasing degree of religious pluralism, which has already started to call into question the quasi-monopoly of the Roman Catholic Church over many aspects of religious
life. On the one hand, these changes in the Italian religious landscape are dependent on the growing impact of global migration upon the European continent. Among the immigrant communities living in Italy (slightly more than five million), Christians (about half of the total) and Muslims (about one third) are the most prominent, while a significant percentage of them (more than seven percent) is related to Hinduism, Buddhism, or other “Eastern” religions. On the other hand, ongoing religious diversification is related to the broader dynamics of the global cultural network, and the strong contribution that they can give to the popularization (in either positive or negative terms) of religious themes through the media and augmented mobility. In this respect, elements of Asian religiosity or ‘spirituality’ seem to have provided a distinctive appeal to the spiritual interests of many Italians. One may think of the 150,000 followers of various forms of Hinduism currently living in the country, about twenty percent of which are Italian nationals, and the popularity enjoyed by the practice of yoga, commercialized though as it may be in many contexts. Apparently, the impact of Buddhism and East Asian religiosity has been even stronger, if one considers that only a small percentage (c. twenty-five percent) of the Italian Buddhist Union’s 80,000 members are believed to be immigrants, and that the largest new religious movement operating in Italy, the lay Japanese Buddhist movement Soka Gakkai International (known in Italy as the Istituto Buddhista Italiano Soka Gakkai), claims alone a membership of about 93,000, almost all of them being native Italians. In this regard, it is also worth mentioning the variety of elements of East Asian ‘spirituality’ that have come to be related to the increasingly popular sphere of martial arts and healing techniques.

Still another contribution to the popularization of aspects of Asian religiosity in the Italian context has been made by sectors of the Roman Catholic Church, notably by individual religious professionals and groups of lay practitioners interested in interreligious dialogue and meditational practices. Their activities, which in many cases build upon the experiences of a previous generation of international Christian meditators, are admittedly limited in scope. And yet, they show to be relevant not only to the study of contemporary religion in Italy, but also to the analysis of religion under globalization as a complex phenomenon related to the working of the global cultural network,

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1 See Pace, Le religioni nell’Italia che cambia.
2 See Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2021.
3 See Eurispes, Risultati del primo Rapporto di ricerca; Bertolo/Giordan, Spiritualità incorporate.
4 See Molle, L’Oriente italiano; Introvigne, Soka Gakkai in Italy.
5 Cf. Prisciandaro, Lezione da Oriente; Giovetti, Luoghi di meditazione, pp. 23–64.
6 See, for example, Löfler, Christians and the Practice of Zen.
interreligious interactions, and glocal practices. Against this backdrop, this article will focus on the formation and activities of one of such groups, the Scuola di Meditazione, which was established in Sardinia about forty years ago within a Church of the Jesuits to promote the practice of meditation.

2 Father Piras and the Scuola di Meditazione

In 1979 the Sardinian-born Francesco Piras, s.j. (1915–2014) was sent back by the Society of Jesus to his native island after about fifty years of service from his novitiate in Turin in the early 1930s to his activities as spiritual director among workers of the automotive industry in Southern Italy. A few years after his assignment to the Church of San Michele in Cagliari, Father Piras started a school of prayer with the aim to reach out to university students and, more in general, to marginal or no longer practicing Catholics. This group developed already in 1983 into a school of meditation (Scuola di Meditazione), with classes based on the teaching method that he had been elaborating during those years through the study of various meditational and relaxation methods. Father Piras’s Scuola di Meditazione was one of the earliest instances in Italy of the use of ‘Eastern’ techniques to promote the practice of meditation for lay people in a Christian context. Analogous experiences emerging from Italian Catholicism in those years include, for example, the group founded in Rome by the Jesuit Mariano Ballester (1935–2021), who incorporated yoga and Buddhist meditational techniques in his Meditazione Profonda e Autoconoscenza (MPA, Deep Meditation and Self-Knowledge) approach; the courses offered near Como by the Barnabite Antonio Gentili (b. 1937), who also adopted elements of yoga and Buddhism for his Christian meditations, and the similar work of the Capuchin Andrea Schnöller (b. 1940), who participated in Father Gentili’s courses and later founded near Trento the association Il Ponte sul Guado (The Bridge on the Ford); the Ricostruttori nella Preghiera (Reconstructors in Prayer) community, originally established in Turin by another Jesuit, Gian Vittorio Cappelletto (1918–2009), who was influenced by the tantric yoga of Ánanda Mārga; and the mixed religious practice promoted in the 1990s within the Stella del Mattino (Morning Star) community near Lodi by the Italian Zen master Giuseppe Jiso Forzani (b. 1949) in collaboration with the Xaverian Luciano Mazzocchi (b. 1939), who was trained in Zen meditation while in Japan as a missionary and later established the Vangelo e Zen (Gospel and Zen) community.7

7 Cf. Giovetti, Luoghi di meditazione, pp. 27–64; Palmisano, Immersion in Experiencing the Sacred; Serra/Milani, Lo Zen in Italia, pp. 87–101.
Just a few years after the inauguration of the Scuola di Meditazione, and despite some resistance from the local Catholic Church, Father Piras’s meditation sessions became increasingly popular among all social strata in the metropolitan area of Cagliari. From the initial one hundred students, he was able to attract about 500 new enrolments per year for his weekly classes, which customarily took place in the large theatre hall adjacent to the Church of San Michele. In time, the Scuola di Meditazione established branches in Sassari and Alghero in Northern Sardinia and launched various other activities, including a cinema, support for missionary work in Central America, and a website.8 At the initiative of Father Piras, it was registered as an association with a board consisting of six lay people (mainly with administrative functions) and the charismatic Sardinian Jesuit as the spiritual leader.

Father Piras’s teaching was almost exclusively oral, and he did not publish any materials about his experiences and methods. Therefore, his meditation sessions represent an invaluable starting point for the analysis of the sources and influences that have contributed to the success of the Scuola di Meditazione. Despite various adaptations and changes over the thirty years of Father Piras’s teaching and some differences between courses for first- and second-year practitioners, it is possible to identify a sort of standardized format for his sessions. Father Piras’s one-hour lessons were introduced by fifteen minutes of music (e.g., classical music) during which participants silently reached their seats and waited for the sound of the gong. At this point everyone stood up performing the namaste gesture, and the session could begin. The first exercise was generally introduced by the reading of a very short story (e.g., from Anthony de Mello’s books), and could consist of a relaxation technique. The session could incorporate yoga breathing exercises, autogenic training, the “descent to zero” (discesa a zero), the “dis-identification and self-identification” (disidentificazione e auto-identificazione) exercise, and elements of zazen meditation. A short break with background music would introduce the second part of the session, which often included guided visualizations. Occasionally, the initial short story was read again toward the end of the session, which was sanctioned by the sound of the gong and the namaste salutation, after which practitioners silently left the hall.

Thus, the contents of Father Piras’s lessons reveal a wide variety of influences. Among these, one finds psychosynthesis, in which Father Piras became interested by reading the scholarship of founder Roberto Assagioli (1888–1974) in Italian translation. In 1980, he also took part in a conference organized in Città della Pieve (Perugia) by one of Assagioli’s disciples, Sergio Bartoli.

8 See the official website of the Scuola di Meditazione at https://www.scuoladimeditazione.eu.
(1929–2009), with whom he had several conversations. There are indications that the participation in this event was one of the key factors behind Father Piras’s decision to establish a meditation group in Cagliari. The Sardinian Jesuit was especially interested in two techniques developed by Assagioli. The first one is the “dis-identification and self-identification” exercise, which consists of three steps: 1) “to affirm with conviction and to become aware of the fact: ‘I have a body, but I am not my body’”; 2) “the realization: ‘I have an emotional life, but I am not my emotions or my feelings’”; and 3) “realizing: ‘I have an intellect, but I am not that intellect’.” For Assagioli, this exercise aims to make us aware that “we are dominated by everything with which our self is identified,” and, as such, it can also open the way to the realization of the higher/transpersonal Self, the “true Self” that is “above, and unaffected by, the flow of the mind-stream or by bodily conditions.” The second psycho-synthetic technique adopted by the Scuola di Meditazione concerns visualizations, such as that on the blossoming of the rose (“Let us imagine a rosebush: Roots, stem, leaves and at the top a rosebud enclosed in its sepals. Now, let us imagine that the sepals start to separate [...]”), which is often recalled by Father Piras’s students. In Assagioli’s work, the “blossoming of the rose” and analogous exercises fall within the treatment of “transpersonal psychosynthesis,” where they are illustrated as techniques specifically aimed at the development of the higher/transpersonal Self. In this connection, Assagioli clarified that the experience of the higher/transpersonal Self can also happen spontaneously or be triggered by practices such as prayer and meditation. Customarily placed in the second part of Father Piras’s sessions after the relaxation exercises,

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10 Assagioli, *Psychosynthesis*, pp. 19, 112, 116–119. For Assagioli, the main aim of psychosynthesis is “the harmonization and integration into one functioning whole of all the qualities and functions of the individual,” a process that culminates in assisting “the realization of one’s true Self” (or the creation of a substitutive permanent center) and “the formation or reconstruction of the personality around the new center.” Assagioli distinguishes between two phases in psychosynthesis, the first being “personal” (aiming first at the development and perfection of the personality) and the second being “spiritual” or “transpersonal” (aiming at “its harmonious coordination and increasing unification with the Self”), and at least three main fields of application: As a “method of psychological development and Self-realization,” a “method of treatment for psychological and psychosomatic disturbances,” and a “method of integral education” (Assagioli, *Psychosynthesis*, pp. 21, 39).

visualizations seem to have played an important role in his teaching method as ‘guided meditations.’

Another significant influence in Father Piras’s teaching was the MPA approach developed by Father Ballester. The fellow Jesuit distinguished between religion as “the acceptance of a divine revelation (faith)” and MPA as “the way to the self-knowledge and opening of human beings’ spiritual dimension by means of specific processes and exercises.” Among these, one finds the “descent to zero,” an exercise aimed at the “threefold silence” of the meditator by lowering as much as possible the amount of interference at each level of perception (bodily, emotional, and mental). This exercise starts with “bodily relaxation,” which focuses on breathing and concentration on single bodily parts (e.g., the right hand, the forearm, etc.); then it works at the level of “emotional relaxation,” with the abandonment of any emerging emotional obstacles to interior peace; and it finally leads to “mental relaxation” through the visualization of a ten-step staircase to be descended by counting from ten to zero. Father Piras had a close relationship with Father Ballester and invited him to hold workshops in Cagliari. While developing his teaching method, he adopted the “descent to zero” exercise with minor adaptations as a propaedeutic relaxation technique that became very popular within the Scuola di Meditazione.

Another set of exercises for his sessions consisted of autogenic training techniques. Father Piras was genuinely interested in this approach originally developed by Johannes Heinrich Schultz (1884–1970), and he used, with adjustments (e.g., the length of the exercises), the six standard exercises (focusing on heaviness, warmth, the heart, breathing, the solar plexus, and the forehead) and visualizations from advanced autogenic training. From Father Piras’s handouts, one can see that he appreciated both the relaxation and neurophysiological benefits of autogenic training.

As for the direct influence of Asian meditational techniques on Father Piras’s teaching, yoga and zazen can hardly be overlooked. In his notes, he explicitly acknowledged that yoga could remind the West of how to approach prayer as a disinterested act, as well as of the respect for the Other (which is also expressed, he noted, in the namaste salutation, “I honor the God who is in you”), the environment and our own body as part of the creation. Even more crucially, he highly valued the emphasis placed by yoga on body posture during rituals, its stress on passive concentration, and its breathing techniques. In this connection, an essential notion for Father Piras was that yoga “gives us the power to freely direct the prāṇā through our mind.” Based on this, he adopted the practice of prāṇāyāma from selected sources such as the

12 See Ballester, Le tecniche di meditazione orientale, pp. 21, 68–71.
Italian translation of T.K.V. Desikachar’s (1938–2016) *The Heart of Yoga* (1995), which is also included in the list of basic readings that he recommended to his students. It is relevant to our discussion that Father Piras also introduced in the Scuola di Meditazione elements of *zazen* meditation, which he practiced under two fellow Jesuits, Father Hugo Enomiya Lassalle (1898–1990) and (especially) Father Reinhard Neudecker (b. 1938). Zen meditation does not seem to have played a major role in Father Piras’s regular sessions. He made several attempts to introduce *zazen* in his classes, but his students’ response was apparently not always encouraging, mainly because of the challenge posed by this meditational technique ‘without support’ (differently, for example, from his guided visualizations). Otherwise, the completion of the descent to zero exercise could usher in a relatively long period of *zazen*-like silent meditation. However, in the mid-1990s a new course titled “Corso di Meditazione Zen” (Zen Meditation Course) was created within the Scuola di Meditazione with a specific focus on Zen meditation, which in those years came to attract up to fifty practitioners. This development took place after Father Piras and some of his closest disciples started participating in the meditation group established by Father Neudecker while he was teaching at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. The new weekly course based on *zazen* sessions has run ever since parallel to the other courses, with some senior students acting as group coordinators. The Corso di Meditazione Zen also organized in Sardinia yearly Zen meditation retreats led by Father Neudecker until his retirement and return to Germany in the mid-2000s.

The speed with which Father Piras was able to build from the foundations his teaching method upon his return to Sardinia is worthy of note. Although through his religious training as a Jesuit he must have gained a certain familiarity with Christian methods of meditations (notably, the Ignatian spiritual exercises), until the age of sixty-four he had operated in an environment unrelated to meditation, let alone to Asian meditational practices. Equally remarkable is the success of his school, if one considers that by the time of his death, he had trained over 10,000 practitioners. As I have shown, there was a considerable variety of influences behind his meditational approach. While this was certainly eclectic, it would be inaccurate to portray it as a simple patchwork of techniques. Rather, its formation was characterized by personal experimentation with those

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14 These estimates have been provided by the Scuola di Meditazione. To give an idea of the scale of this success, at the time of the 2011 census the entire metropolitan area of Cagliari had a resident population of little more than 400,000.
relaxation and meditational practices, as well as by research conducted in collaboration with his disciples, whose feedback on their own practice was systematically used by Father Piras to tailor his teaching. This patient work mainly focusing on breathing, awareness, concentration, and the dimension of silence provided the framework for the adaptation of specific techniques to his lessons. As also explained by Father Piras himself in some interviews, the aim of the Scuola di Meditazione was essentially to help students to overcome their attachment to worldly goods and the hectic pace of modern life to be able to autonomously achieve “inner freedom.” And this personal search for freedom was to be pursued especially through the rediscovery of the value of “silence” (silenzio) and “breathing” (respiro). In this connection, there are indications that Zen Buddhism might have occupied a privileged position in Father Piras’s approach to meditation. To start with, although he could join Father Lassalle’s sessions only for a short time, he credited him with being his “master” (maestro), and the encounter with the fellow Alsatian Jesuit was apparently another key event inspiring Father Piras to start meditation classes for lay people. It is also acknowledged by several of his closest disciples that Father Piras considered zazen the “university” (università) of meditation, that is, the most difficult and sophisticated meditational approach. This makes perhaps it easier to understand why he could characterize the “inner freedom” to be autonomously achieved by his students in (Buddhist) terms of “emptiness” (vuoto), and why he could affirm that “through Zen one can accomplish human perfection.”

Father Piras did not shape his own endeavor as a mere proselytizing activity, but as a “spiritual work” concerned with the cultivation of “good persons” (rather than “good Christians”) with “strong ethical principles.” This explains why he hardly introduced any Christian themes in his weekly meditation sessions, and why the Scuola di Meditazione has been so popular among Christians, non-Christians and atheists alike. A deeper interaction between his meditational method and a specifically Christian religious path was instead pursued by Father Piras within the context of other activities promoted by the Scuola di Meditazione, such as the annual spiritual retreats held in various locations that also included the celebration of the Catholic mass, and the meetings with groups of selected practitioners based on the lectio divina that

15 Cf. Masala, Il gesuita zen e i suoi mille allievi, Ritratti.
16 Ms Margherita Piras, personal communication (13 October 2021).
17 See Pisanò, Il padre gesuita e la filosofia zen.
18 See Masala, Il gesuita zen e i suoi mille allievi, Ritratti; Pisanò, Il padre gesuita e la filosofia zen.
took place for years parallel to the other classes and among families related to the school.

3 Later Developments

After the death of Father Piras in 2014, the spiritual leadership of the school was taken over by another Jesuit and theologian, Father Davide Magni (b. 1965). Father Magni had been for years the coordinator of the interfaith activities within the parish of San Fedele in Milan, where he conducted courses on prayer and meditation for lay people besides being editorial member of the Jesuit magazine Popoli. Under his leadership, the curriculum of the Scuola di Meditazione has undergone significant changes, based on his previous teaching experience and personal interest especially in Buddhism and Daoism. Father Magni's introductory and advanced courses are shaped as an original meditational journey with a focus on the “here and now,” which begins with techniques traditionally taught in the Scuola di Meditazione such as autogenic training, psychosynthesis, and the descent to zero (which he learned under Father Ballester’s guidance), and then proceeds by exploring the “Eastern forms of wisdom” represented by Hinduism (“Yoga”), Buddhism (“Vipassanā, Ch’ān/Zen”) and Daoism (“Qī Gōng”), and the “Mediterranean” traditions of Hebraism (“Qabbalah”), Christianity (“Hēsyhía”) and Islam (“Sufismo”). The theory and practice of these meditational techniques are introduced in one-hour sessions held now in another church in Cagliari (Cristo Re), which start with the customary musical background, the sound of the hand bell, and the namaste salutation.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Father Magni started offering online sessions with the aid of presentation slides, which still run parallel to on-site teaching. A basic idea underlying Father Magni’s method is that one of the main aims of any religion is to guide believers along the path to inner spiritual cultivation within a communitarian context, and that this common ground provides the opportunity for interreligious dialogue and mutual enrichment. According to Father Magni, this encounter should not lead to “syncretism.” Rather, it implies the search for (and practical experience of) “equivalences” and “analogies” at the intersection of different traditions, which should necessarily start from the body – the first domain of our experience, the other two being the mind and the spirit – through the exploration of breathing, posture, movement, and the ultimate “unification of the whole body.” In this connection, Father Magni acknowledges that taijiquan, as an ascetic practice at the intersection of Buddhism and Daoism focusing on the process of self-perfectioning “in the
body and through the body,” provides “one of the most effective aids.” More in general, for him the contribution offered by Asian meditational experiences is very important because the West has lost its ability “to value the body as the temple of the Spirit.” Based on the conviction that “the only possible interfaith dialogue is that helping the discovery of the human being,” Father Magni sees meditation as a powerful tool for the development of human potential (“nurturing life”) that does not necessarily involve the dimension of faith in God. As such, his approach reaffirms one of the main concerns animating the Scuola di Meditazione since its inception, namely, the priority of cultivating “human beings” with a deep spiritual life over proselytization.

A recent development within the Scuola di Meditazione is its participation in the “School of the schools of Christian meditation” (Scuola delle scuole di meditazione cristiana), a program consisting of a series of three-day retreats in Prato launched in February 2022 by the Rete sulla Via del Silenzio (Network on the Way to Silence), a network for the promotion of Christian meditation, to share different experiences and approaches in this field. Together with the Scuola di Meditazione, in this program take part also other Christian communities with a long familiarity with elements of Asian meditation, such as those founded by the abovementioned Father Ballester, Father Gentili, and Father Schnöller. As also acknowledged by the organizers, this initiative has been encouraged by Pope Francis’s catechesis on prayer of April 28, 2021, which affirmed that “meditating is a necessary human dimension” and that the increasing popularity of this practice is “a phenomenon to be looked on favourably.” At the same time, the Pope specified that for Christians “meditating means going – guided by a phrase from the Scripture, from a word – to the encounter with Jesus within us.”

Finally, it is worth mentioning that to date the Scuola di Meditazione still offers the weekly Corso di Meditazione Zen, with former senior disciples of Father Piras and Father Neudecker acting as coordinators and a core membership of about thirty practitioners. Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, this group, too, has mainly conducted online meditation sessions. These start with a fifteen-minute musical background and a short presentation by one of the coordinators, after which the sound of wooden clappers and the bell

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19 See Magni, Il corpo nella preghiera.
20 See Magni, Esiste uno yoga cristiano?
21 See Masala, L’avventura piú pericolosa?
22 Pope Francis, General Audience; Lumini, Pregare nel silenzio. On the discussions on meditation within the Roman Catholic Church since the publication of the Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of Christian Meditation by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1989), see, for example, Pasquale, La ricezione della lettera.
introduce twenty minutes of *zazen* meditation. The sessions then end with the recitation of the four bodhisattva vows and a short final reading.\textsuperscript{23}

4 The Global Dimension of the Scuola di Meditazione

Academic discussions taking place in the last few decades in connection with the broader field of cultural globalization have indicated that the role of religion under globalizing conditions can hardly be reduced either to that of a purely antagonistic force reacting to social change in the name of tradition (e.g., ‘fundamentalism’), or to the mere institutional expansion of specific organizations/traditions across the globe (e.g., ‘the globalization of Buddhism’).\textsuperscript{24} Broadly speaking, it is possible to identify within the debate on religion and globalization at least four partially overlapping areas of enquiry focusing, respectively, on the diffusion and global flow of religious forms (also, but not only, institutional), on the interactions between different religious traditions in a global setting, on phenomena of religious glocalization, and on the interactions between religion and secular societal systems.\textsuperscript{25} The case study of the Scuola di Meditazione is relevant to the exploration of especially the first three of these areas. That is, besides being an example of the wider trend towards religious diversification in the Italian context, the trajectory of this school also provides evidence of 1) the role of Asian religions as carriers of cultural globalization; 2) local attitudes towards Asian and other ‘world’ religions in response to their increasing presence/visibility in the global arena; and 3) the glocalization of Asian religions, namely, their creative adoption by local players resulting in the emergence of distinctively new religious forms or meaningful adjustments to preexisting ones.

1) With regard to the first area of enquiry, the impact of Asian religions upon the Scuola di Meditazione is immediately evident in the role played by yoga and Zen Buddhism in Father Piras’s sessions. Father Piras apparently did not have the opportunity to formally study yoga, but he could access it indirectly through selected Italian translations of classics (e.g., Patañjali’s *Yoga sūtra*) and modern authors (e.g., Desikachar), as well as various Italian publications on this subject. In this sense, the adoption of yoga techniques by the Scuola di

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\textsuperscript{23} The four bodhisattva vows are recited in Italian: “Gli esseri senzienti prometto di salvare / I pensieri ingannevoli prometto di tagliare / Le porte della verità prometto di penetrare / La via luminosa prometto di raggiungere.”


\textsuperscript{25} Cf. Dessì, *Religioni e globalizzazione*. 
Meditazione is dependent on the broader phenomenon of the globalization of yoga as a modernized, postural, health-oriented, relaxation, meditational, and spiritual practice promoted in the West especially by global yoga teachers and intellectuals (e.g., B.K.S. Iyengar, Desikachar, Vivekananda). While Father Piras was deepening his knowledge of yoga for practical purposes, a considerable advantage was probably offered by his very training and experience as a Jesuit, given the traditional familiarity of this religious order with the ‘East’ and its religious cultures. This was certainly the case with Father Piras’s relationship with Zen meditation. His “master” Father Lassalle had formally studied zazen in Japan within the Harada lineage receiving dharma transmission by the Zen master Yamada Kōun (1907–1989) and was a pioneering figure in the teaching of Zen mediation for Christians. The Jesuits and other sectors of the Roman Catholic Church had been relatively interested in this field, and Father Piras’s encounter and further engagement with Zen practice under Father Neudecker (who had also studied zazen with Yamada) was certainly indebted to his belonging to these religious networks. Just to make another example, the same posture recommended by Father Piras for his meditation classes had been illustrated by the Oratorian theologian Klemens Tilmann (1904–1984) in his book *Die Führung zur Meditation* (1971), namely, sitting near the front of the seat of a chair with crossed ankles, and the left hand resting on the right hand with the tips of the thumbs lightly touching each other (i.e., the ‘cosmic mudra’ used in Zen meditation).

It is not incidental that this posture is also recommended (with explicit reference to Tilmann’s book) by Father Ballester for his MPA courses. Already in the early 1980s the Spanish Jesuit elaborated on the topic of “Eastern techniques” in a contribution for *La Civiltà Cattolica* (a periodical published by the Jesuits), in which he argues that if wisely used they can also be beneficial in a Christian context to counter excessive conceptualization, emphasize the role of the body in meditation, and reach out to those who live outside the Church. In those years, Father Ballester had been introducing in his meditation classes some elements of “Eastern” meditation following their growing popularity among lay people, and his MPA method acknowledges the influence

28 Translated in Italian as *Guida alla meditazione* (1974), it is included in Father Piras’s personal library together with four other translations of Tilmann’s volumes.
29 See Ballester, *Meditazione profonda e autoconoscenza*, p. 67.
30 See Ballester, *Le tecniche di meditazione orientale*. 
of both Western (e.g., psychology) and Asian (e.g., yoga, Buddhist meditation) sources, to which he had access, among other things, during his permanence in India as a missionary and his participation in Father Lassalle’s retreats. Rather emblematically, the very last phase of the MPA (i.e., “Deep Meditation”) implies the selection of a personal “Supreme Name” (*Nome Supremo*) from a long list also including “Tao” (Daoism), “Mu” (Zen Buddhism), as well as “Brahmā” and “Om” (Hinduism), which should be repeated rhythmically (and synchronously with breathing) before culminating in a state of “deep silence.”

It is worth recalling here that also other techniques adopted by Father Piras are related to Asian religious culture. As for autogenic training, it is well known that Schultz initially presented his method as a form of “rationalized and systematized yoga” (and Father Piras’s notes show that he himself was aware of such relationship), although he later distanced himself from this interpretation and acknowledged medical hypnosis as the main underlying influence.

In the case of psychosynthesis, it is worthy of mention that Assagioli was involved in the Theosophical movement and a member of Alice A. Bailey’s (1880–1949) Arcane School. The Italian psychologist explicitly showed his deep interest in Asian mysticism in his writings, in which he also established a clear connection between the central practice of what he calls a “modern Yoga” for the New Age – that is, the realization of the “Higher Self” as described in “Eastern” (e.g., the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Upanishads*) and Theosophical (e.g., the works of Helena P. Blavatsky and Alice A. Bailey) sources – and the aims of his spiritual/transpersonal psychosynthesis.

The presence of elements of Asian meditation in the Scuola di Meditazione continues to be considerable under the leadership of Father Magni. This can be seen indirectly in the inclusion of autogenic training and psychosynthesis in his teaching, and more directly in the use of specifically Asian meditational techniques such as yoga, *vipassanā*, and *taijiquan*. On the one hand, this reflects Father Magni’s work as a theologian involved in interreligious dialogue, which relies on the wide range of sources and publications on this topic that have become available to the scholarly community. On the other hand, it is the result of his personal engagement with meditation, which was first sparked by his encounter with martial arts and then with Ignatian spirituality. Father Magni initially expanded this interest to Asian meditational techniques

by practicing with figures such as Father Ballester, Father Cappelletto, and still another Jesuit, the Japanese Father Kadowaki Kakichi (1926–2017), who synthesized Zen and Ignatian spirituality; and then through his permanence in Sri Lanka (at the Tulana Research Center), and the study of taijiquan especially under the Italian martial-art master Roberto Fassi (1935–2014), who had also been a disciple of the Chinese master Chang Dsu Yao (1918–1992) since the mid-1970s.34

The discussion above shows that the formation and activities of the Scuola di Meditazione are meaningfully related to the first dimension of religious globalization introduced at the beginning of this section (i.e., Asian religions as ‘carriers of globalization’). In this specific case, this dimension refers to the role of Asian religions within the cultural exchanges between the ‘East’ and Europe (and more in general, the ‘West’).35 In terms of the categories proposed by Thomas Csordas, it is possible to identify at least three “means” significantly contributing to the currents of global culture in this context, that is, missionization, mediatization, and mobility.36 As far as the impact of yoga, Buddhist meditation, and taijiquan on the Scuola di Meditazione is concerned, it is apparent that since its formative years the increased availability in Italy of a wide range of publications/translations related to these practices has played a prominent role in their popularization (mediatization). To a large extent, however, this was prepared and accompanied by the active presence in Europe of Asian religious modernizers – including specialists of disciplines with meditational implications such as certain martial arts – and by the contributions of Christian missionaries bringing back from the ‘East’ their baggage of experiences and meditational techniques (missionization); and, additionally, by the increasing number of European teachers/students of meditation travelling back and forth to Asian countries and different locations in Europe (mobility). The cases of autogenic training and psychosynthesis also show the indirect impact of Asian religions upon the Scuola di Meditazione as a result of an earlier phase of global religious exchanges (from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century) featuring, among other things, the consolidation of Orientalist views.37

2) Especially because of its interplay with various forms of Asian religiosity, the case of the Scuola di Meditazione is also relevant to another dimension of religion under globalization, that is, the new scale and shape of interactions

34 Cf. Fassi, *Il corpo, la mente e il cuore*.
36 See Csordas, *Introduction*.
37 Cf. Partridge, *Lost Horizon*. 
between religions resulting from their augmented visibility in the global arena. It is apparent that experimentations such as those made by Father Piras in Cagliari were enabled by changes within the Roman Catholic Church brought about by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), which, while reaffirming that “the fullness of religious life” is offered by Christianity alone, encouraged “dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions” based on the assumption that these “often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.”38 This historic shift implying a global repositioning towards other ‘world’ religions continues to inform also recent positions on Christian meditation within the Roman Catholic Church. In the early 1980s, it was reflected in a rather pioneering way in the general orientation given by Father Piras to the Scuola di Meditazione, in which meditational elements of other traditions were used to cultivate “good persons” by supporting them in their spiritual search. Indeed, the fact that he did not structure his work as a proselytizing endeavor suggests that he adhered to a mild version of the Roman Catholic new inclusivist approach. From an analytical point of view, this can be characterized as the full acknowledgment of the competing claim asserted by Asian forms of religious authority to legitimately grant access to deep spiritual awareness, and the partial (bordering to full) acknowledgment of their claim to grant access to religious salvation/liberation.39 The centrality of this openness to other religions can still be seen today in the Scuola di Meditazione under the spiritual leadership of Father Magni, who has long been engaged in forms of interreligious dialogue. This approach can also find varied expressions in members’ individual narratives, such as the understanding of the spiritual world as “one whole” and the acknowledgment of all religious traditions of the world as different “paths to the same Truth.”

3) These dynamics of global interreligious encounters partly overlap with the dimension of religious globalization concerning the glocalization of Asian religions. This is because the kind of ‘soft inclusivism’ promoted by the Scuola di Meditazione since its formation has provided suitable conditions for the interplay of imported religious elements with local culture. As illustrated above, Father Piras’s method was basically aimed to the personal search for a deeper spiritual awareness mainly with the aid of techniques directly or indirectly related to Asian religiosity. Analytically speaking, for engaged Christian

38 See Pope Paul VI, Nostra Aetate.
39 For a detailed discussion of the repositioning of religious actors in global society in terms of the adaptation of their religious systems/worlds to the increasing pressure exercised by the authoritative claims of other religious and secular systems, as well as by specific ideas and practices circulating worldwide, see Dessì, The Global Repositioning of Japanese Religions, pp. 162–189.
meditators it encouraged the integration of those techniques within their individual religious systems/worlds as a preparation to a genuine religious life or ultimate salvation. The centrality of this process, while remaining implicit in Father Piras’s regular sessions, comes to the fore in other meetings for smaller circles of Christian students, in which he used elements of his method (e.g., the descent to zero) to introduce the proper lectio divina with the meditation on passages from the Gospel. In the case of other engaged meditators loosely identifiable as ‘spiritual seekers,’ those same techniques could instead be integrated in a more flexible way – for example, as the opening itself of a transcendent dimension (e.g., the ‘wholeness of life’). As such, the effects of the spiritual work conducted within the Scuola di Meditazione can be approached from the perspective of glocalization, that is, the creative adoption by local actors of globally circulating ideas/practices to reshape their own identities. It is apparent that the Scuola di Meditazione continues to date to provide the framework for the emergence of these glocal practices, as is also shown by the individual narratives of members. There are, for example, those who use these Asian-related meditational techniques during their participation in formal Christian rituals; those who have adopted other meditational tools integrating them in original ways with those provided by the school; those who emphasize the analogies between core Buddhist practices (e.g., the four vows of the bodhisattva) and the dimension of Christian mysticism; those who experience the presence of God in the ‘subtle energies’ manifesting themselves in meditation; and others who have introduced elements of Zen meditation in the structure of their pilgrimage practice revolving around rural Catholic sanctuaries in Sardinia (the “Camminantes” project), a relatively recent spin-off from the Scuola di Meditazione.

5 Conclusion

Against the backdrop of ongoing religious diversification in the Italian context, the case study of the Scuola di Meditazione illustrates the role played by sectors of the Roman Catholic Church in the popularization of elements of Asian religiosity in the country. Tracing back to the early 1980s, this school was able to capitalize on the fascination with the ‘East’ then consolidating through the media, thus emerging as one of the first communities in Italy to promote elements of ‘Eastern’ meditation in a Christian environment. Indeed,
the materials used by Father Piras and his personal meditational experiences encompassed various techniques directly or indirectly related to Asian religiosity with the aim to foster spiritual growth among (not necessarily Christian) individuals, an objective still actively pursued by Father Magni after the death of the founder. It is relevant to our perspective on religion under globalization that the Scuola di Meditazione was able to catch up on the new cultural climate set by the Second Vatican Council. This allowed a positioning towards ‘Eastern’ and other ‘world’ religions along the lines of a mild inclusivism that acknowledges their claims to effectively provide alternative paths to spiritual growth and, partially, to religious salvation. Finally, the case of the Scuola di Meditazione is also relevant to the study of religious glocalization. In fact, its practices, though explicitly not aimed at promoting forms of ‘syncretism,’ have provided the context for the creative adoption of widely circulating elements of Asian religiosity by individuals engaged in the reshaping of their religious/spiritual worlds within the framework of global society.

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