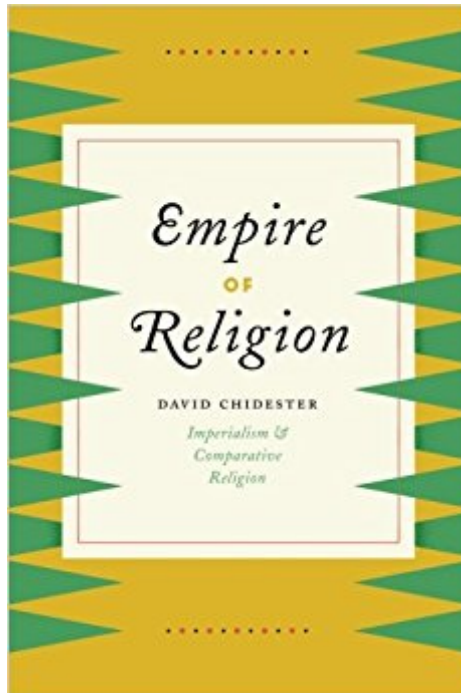




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Empire Of Religion: Imperialism And Comparative Religion



Synopsis

How is knowledge about religion and religions produced, and how is that knowledge authenticated and circulated? David Chidester seeks to answer these questions in *An Empire of Religion*, documenting and analyzing the emergence of a science of comparative religion in Great Britain during the second half of the nineteenth century and its complex relations to the colonial situation in southern Africa. In the process, Chidester provides a counterhistory of the academic study of religion, an alternative to standard accounts that have failed to link the field of comparative religion with either the power relations or the historical contingencies of the imperial project. In developing a material history of the study of religion, Chidester documents the importance of African religion, the persistence of the divide between savagery and civilization, and the salience of mediations—imperial, colonial, and indigenous—in which knowledge about religions was produced. He then identifies the recurrence of these mediations in a number of case studies, including Friedrich Max Müller's dependence on colonial experts, H. Rider Haggard and John Buchan's fictional accounts of African religion, and W. E. B. Du Bois's studies of African religion. By reclaiming these theorists for this history, Chidester shows that race, rather than theology, was formative in the emerging study of religion in Europe and North America. Sure to be controversial, *An Empire of Religion* is a major contribution to the field of comparative religious studies.

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Customer Reviews

“Chidester renders highly original readings of major figures like Max Müller, Charles

Darwin, James Frazer, Herbert Spencer, E. B. Tylor, and W. E. B. Du Bois. . . . By foregrounding the complex apparatuses of imperialism, racialization histories, and the imbrication of racial knowledge with colonial power, Chidester offers a game-changing volume that will shift scholarly understanding of empire and religion. . . . Essential. (Choice) “There is a growing body of scholarship that explores the complex relations between European imperialism and the modern field of comparative religion, but *Empire of Religion* is the first to really interrogate the relations between colonial Africa and the modern study of religion in a comprehensive and sophisticated way. Elegantly pairing key themes and authors in each section, Chidester’s lucid and powerful book will be of central importance to specialists in African religions and history, and the larger genealogy of religion as a modern category. (Hugh B. Urban, Ohio State University) “Chidester makes vivid his story by focusing on important figures in the discipline, including Friedrich Max Müller, E.B. Tyler, Andrew Lang, James Frazer, and W.E.B. DuBois. Even H. Rider Haggard and Mohandas Gandhi also figure in this genealogy. . . . Chidester’s critical analysis of how the early scholars navigated their cultural heritage suggest lessons modern scholars might consider. (Catholic Library World) “Brilliantly illustrates the epistemological perils associated both with positing the insider as a “mystical postulate of authenticity . . . on the one hand, and with conferring objectivity to outsider status as though it could neatly erase tacit realities of privilege, power, and (in this case) empire, on the other. . . . Essential reading for graduate students and professional scholars. (Journal of Religion) “Here, for perhaps the first time, is a genuinely empirical study of the empire of religion. Chidester doesn’t merely name a genealogy and geography of power, he proves it in the form of triple mediations that spin out from a very specific place, South Africa. Moving restlessly between the accounts of local actors, colonial officials and, most importantly, metropolitan theoreticians, Chidester Æœdoggedly Æœ (see the book!) disentangles the dubious series of transactions and translations that generated the fetish called theory, and exposes its imperial encumbrances. (Paul Johnson, University of Michigan) “Chidester productively treats the famous scholars of religion as unintentional informants to their peculiar, imperial, and metropolitan society. . . . [His] discussion on the production, authorization and circulation of knowledge about religion is instructive. . . . The reader also encounters many fascinating themes, one and each worthy of an extensive article. (Religion) “This book challenges scholars of any field that relies on comparison—who do we cite and what counts as evidence and as expertise? It lays bare the incestuous acts of scholarly citation and recitation by reminding us of the materiality, multiple

meanings, and power relations of cultural encounters in Africa. (Journal of African History) "A singularly erudite book and a signal contribution to the burgeoning literature in the field of African comparative religion and missionary history. (Anglican and Episcopal History)" The story Chidester tells, however, is much more interesting and complex than a simple description of knowledge and scholarship as tools of colonial domination. Instead, he traces what he calls the "triple mediation" of imperial, colonial, and indigenous agents, sources, and voices in the creation of knowledge about religion." (Victorian Studies)

David Chidester is professor of religious studies and director of the Institute for Comparative Religion in Southern Africa at the University of Cape Town. He is the author or editor of more than twenty books, including the award-winning *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion* in South Africa. He lives in South Africa.

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