



Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion

David Chidester

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How is knowledge about religion and religions produced, and how is that knowledge authenticated and circulated? David Chidester seeks to answer these questions in *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, *Empire of Religion* is a major contribution to the field of comparative religious studies.

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