

2017 UCT Book Award recipient: Professor David Chidester

Book title: “Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion”.

Citation for graduation ceremony

Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion (University of Chicago Press, 2014) provides a new history of the study of religion that locates knowledge about religion and religions within the power relations of imperial ambitions, colonial situations, and indigenous innovations. The book uncovers the material mediations—imperial, colonial, and indigenous—in which knowledge about religion was produced during the rise of an academic study of religion between the 1870s and the 1920s in Europe and North America.

Focusing on one colonial contact zone, South Africa, as a crucial site of interaction, the book shows how imperial theorists such as Friedrich Max Müller, E. B. Tylor, Andrew Lang, and James Frazer depended upon the raw materials provided by colonial middlemen who in turn depended upon indigenous informants and collaborators who were undergoing colonization. Reversing the flow of knowledge production, African theorists such as W. E. B. Du Bois, S. M. Molema, and H. I. E. Dhlomo turned European imperial theorists of religion into informants in pursuing their own intellectual projects.

By developing a material history of the study of religion, *Empire of Religion* documents the importance of African religion, the persistence of the conceptual divide between savagery and civilization, and the salience of complex mediations in which knowledge about religion and religions was produced, authenticated, and circulated within imperial comparative religion.

Reviewers have described *Empire of Religion* as “game-changing” and “essential,” as “lucid and powerful,” as “reminding us of the materiality, multiple meanings, and power relations of cultural encounters in Africa.” *Empire of Religion* was a finalist for the American Academy of Religion’s Award for Excellence in Religious Studies and the Society for the Anthropology of Religion’s Clifford Geertz Prize. Today it receives the highest recognition from the University of Cape Town, the UCT Book Award.
