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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Surprising Possibilities in the Study of Religion and Materiality

Review by Kristina Helgesson Kjellin

Religion. Material Dynamics.

By David Chidester. 2018. University of California Press.

In my reading of *Religion. Material Dynamics*, one sentence in particular strikes me: “[T]he academic study of religion is a joke” (71). Chidester does not write that in order to denounce all academic research pertaining to religion. Rather, with these words he wants to point to the alternatives and possibilities that joking and laughing enable: “Often, the joke confronts us with an incongruous juxtaposition between a normative and an alternative pattern of conduct.” Seeing the academic study of religion as a joke opens for “exploring alternative possibilities for being human in the world. Instead of imposing a necessary form, the study of religion produces an exhilarating sense of freedom in the play of possibilities” (71). I understand Chidester’s message in this book to be exactly that: the term “religion” is so varied and multi-faceted than what the dominating Western understandings over the years have claimed. Moreover, many of the dominating understandings of “religion” are artificial constructions, inventions. Thus, one important aim of the book is to illuminate the connections between power and disciplinary knowledge and to do away with these false understandings that have become truths, and also to lay open the colonial and imperial conditions that have formed these understandings. Chidester is not the first to do that, but he does so by emphasizing “religious materiality and the material study of religion” (xi) with political economy as the lens, thus stating that “religion” can never be understood outside of “the material dynamics of conditions and consequences” (210). That is also the overall argument of the book: the necessity of deconstructing, reconstructing, and contextualizing “religion” in order to make the term relevant at all.

The book is structured into three sections: “Categories,” “Formations,” and “Circulations.” In the first section, “Categories,” Chidester investigates the material dynamics of some of the basic categories in the study of religion and asks “[W]here do our categories come from? How do they work? What do they do? How can we rethink our basic modes of thinking?” (19). The categories he looks at are “Animism,” “Sacred,” “Space,” “Time,” and finally “Incongruity,” when categorical distinctions are being challenged or maybe violated. By emphasizing the material dynamics of these various categories, Chidester contextualizes how they came into being. Animism, for instance, coined by the anthropologist E. B. Tylor (1832-1917), was a theoretical construction that fitted well with the colonial and imperial project, where indigenous peoples, defined as “animists,” were placed on the lowest step in an imagined evolutionary ladder, while the Europeans were placed at the top. The consequences were, as we know, devastating. Although since long dismissed in the academic study of religion, the term continues to be used, for instance in a handbook for Christian missionaries, as late as 2003 (Gailyn Van Rheenen 2003).

Chidester continues this section by examining how “Sacred,” “Space,” and “Time” are deeply intertwined with politics and economics. Religious or sacred space deals with questions of ownership – who is included and who is excluded? Who has access to a particular space? Similarly, religious time is closely intertwined with the material dynamics of ritual, of the usage of clocks and calendars, and with such common activities as preparing, cooking, and eating food. The highlight of this section is the chapter on “Incongruity,” where Chidester shows how the intercultural encounters that emerged through the colonial project, resulted in situations where these categories were being challenged. By using examples from the South African context, Chidester illuminates how the encounter resulted in humorous reflections on, and plays of, difference. However, the missionaries did not see the humorous side of things, so when local peoples laughed at the ideas and beliefs that the missionaries preached, laughter was interpreted as “‘uncivilized’ embodied behavior, [that] signaled an absence of rationality” (68).

The next section, “Formations,” is divided into chapters with the following titles: “Culture,” “Economy,” “Colonialism,” “Imperialism,” and “Apartheid.” Chidester brings up formations as “configurations of power in which religious symbols, discourses, practices, and institutions emerge” (75). These formations are forces that affect religion but not with a “simple relation of cause and effect, but in complex configurations of discourses and power relations” (77). Chidester begins this section of the book by discussing the embodiment and material culture of religion, bringing up for instance the importance of objects, art, relics and icons, the senses, and communication media. However, it is the chapters on “Colonialism,” “Imperialism,” and “Apartheid” that engage me the most, where the intertwining of religion with politics, economics, and violence are outlined. Chidester describes the various steps in the colonial encounter and how religion was used by the colonizers in order to manage and control local populations. In his discussion on South Africa during apartheid, Chidester refers to Talal Asad and his reasoning on how the marking and enforcement of boundaries by the hegemonic power is built on “differentiating and classifying practices” rather than on “dissolving differences into an overarching unity” (130). These are important questions, Chidester argues, for future research: Why the obsession of purity and of classifications, for instance of so called “world religions” and “indigenous religions”? He argues for a dynamic and situated understanding of all religions “as resources and strategies” in order to “counteract colonial, imperial, or apartheid formulations of these resources and strategies as ‘religious systems’ that can be contained or controlled” (131).

The last section, “Circulations,” shows how mobility, change, and diffusion are crucial aspects to consider if we agree with the material dynamics of religion that Chidester outlines. The chapters of this section deal with “Shamans,” “Mobility,” “Popular,” “Touching,” and “Oceans.” As the titles suggest, Chidester brings forth the multitude of ways that religion moves, changes, and diffuses, for instance through the religious specialist of the shaman in colonial encounters, through present-day popular culture, through bodily senses, and across oceans. In the chapter on touching, where he discusses how religion moves through bodies, he touches (!) on the currently most urgent issue for the world: the sanctity of the body that can be invaded by intruders such as viruses. He asks: “How do people handle living in such a world – from the global economy to the physical body – that is driven by invisible tactile forces?” (190). For sure, this is something that humanity at the moment is trying its best to learn.

I highly recommend *Religion. Material Dynamics* to students, teachers, and researchers interested in religion. The book offers many interesting and important insights of how we creatively – and with a sense of humor - can think of and understand religion in its diversity as intertwined with materiality. By combining case studies as varied as those mentioned above, the book casts light on sometimes surprising possibilities in the study of religion and

materiality. Most examples in the book refer to various forms of Christianity, although examples of other religious traditions are brought up as well. My concern is that such all-encompassing conditions as migration and climate change are not mentioned. Globalization is described as "fluidity, fluctuations, [and] circulations" [...] "without fixed borders" (176), and as we well know this is only part of the story. Similarly, how can we understand the intertwinement of religion and materiality when the very existence of this materiality is being threatened by rising temperatures, melting ice bergs, and rampant wildfires? I hope David Chidester will tackle these enormous challenges in his coming writing.

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Reference cited

Gailyn Van Rheenen 2003. *Communicating Christ among Folk Religionists: Kingdom Ministry in Satan's Nest*, <http://missiology.org/folkreligion/>



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