



# The material turn in Religious Studies and the possibility of critique: Assessing Chidester's analysis of 'the fetish'

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In recent debates the neglect of the material dimension of religion and the foregrounding of beliefs in the modern academic study of religion has been attributed to a Protestant bias. As corrective a number of researchers have shifted their attention to the study of bodily performances, sensory experiences and sacred objects in religious traditions. In this article I will enquire how David Chidester's analysis of the cultural, political and economic uses of 'fetishes' under 19th century colonial conditions in southern Africa and in European centres of theory formation on the one hand, and under 20th and 21st century American imperial conditions on the other, may inform the comparative study of religions. Central to my argument will be that the realisation that religions are necessarily concretely mediated should not preclude the possibility of a systemic critique of power relations that are at work in the uses of objects in religions, the comparison of religions and the comparative study of religions.

## Introduction

### The material turn in the comparative study of religions

In their recently edited volume *Things: Religion and the question of materiality* (2012), Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer maintain that the recent turn to materiality in Religious Studies has inaugurated a crucial corrective to the one-sided Protestant focus on beliefs that have influenced the modern, comparative study of religions since its emergence in the second half of the 19th century. Scholars of religion have only recently started to realise that religion is necessarily concretely mediated in order to be present, visible and tangible in the world – even if its practitioners sometimes claim the opposite. Calvinists, for example, may insist that material things and rituals play only a secondary role in their tradition, but on closer inspection it becomes clear that a myriad of objects, bodily performances, sensations, emotions and gestures play a much more important role in Calvinism than usually acknowledged.

Accepting that 'material religion' constitutes a new, key analytical concept in Religious Studies, Houtman and Meyer (2012) then propose that we take as entry point for our study of this dimension of religion specific, concrete instances, for example:

- objects like relics, amulets, dress codes, painted or sculpted images, written words and architectural spaces
- feelings and sensory experiences like seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching
- bodily performances in specific gestures, rituals, ceremonies and festivals.

They insist simultaneously that this shift in research emphasis, from beliefs to practices, from ideas to material things, though not abandoning interest in the former, profoundly challenges the modern, secular location of religion in the interior, private sphere of the individual by re-situating religion explicitly within the public sphere. They finally hold, that the social, political and economic uses of such religious 'things' may become particularly apparent when studied within colonial 'frontier zones' (Houtman & Meyer 2012:11).

It is within this context of a shift in research emphasis within the field of Religious Studies<sup>1</sup> that they appreciate an article by David Chidester (2000c), in which he indicated the need to '[come] to terms

1. I take Houtman and Meyer (2012) as point of reference here, since they offer in their introduction to this collection of essays an excellent orientation on the new material study of religions (with due appreciation of Chidester's contribution), and solicited contributions from key authors in this emerging field, for example, Peter Pels (2010) (cf. also his article in Hicks & Beaudry 2010), Matthew Engelke (cf. also his article in Orsi 2012) and David Morgan (cf. also his article in Orsi 2012). Other major works are by Bynum (2011), Orsi (2005), Rambelli (2007), and Vásquez (2011). This new trend in Religious Studies was, furthermore, chosen by Meyer (2012) as topic for her inaugural, when she moved from Anthropology to Religious Studies at the University of Utrecht. Reflecting on the first 10 years of the publication of the highly-regarded journal *Material Religion*, the editors (Meyer et al. 2014:105) remark that 10 years ago 'the phrase "material religion" was not in common usage', but that now in 2014 'somewhat due to the success of the journal, the phrase "material religion" can be used without explanation or justification.' For recent literature that argues for the foregrounding of materiality in philosophy and in the philosophy of religion, see the insightful survey in Schilbrack (2014).



with materiality as part of (the study of) religion' (Houtman & Meyer 2012:6).<sup>2</sup> Unlike 19th century materialist attempts to 'unmask entities such as God, gods, and spirits as fictions', the aim now was according to Houtman and Meyer (2012) instead, to get to understand:

how practices of religious mediation effect the presence of these entities in the world through bodily sensations, texts, buildings, pictures, objects, and other material forms that involve bodies and things. (p. 6)

This was a dimension which Chidester (2000c) found 'still largely implicit' in Religious Studies around the turn of the millennium.

In an earlier work *Savage systems: Colonialism and comparative religion in Southern Africa* (1996b) Chidester had, however, already analysed material objects in comparisons of religions in early 19th century colonial South Africa, their use by theorists of religion in imperial metropoleis in the second half of the 19th century and the influence of the latter on comparative religion in the apartheid era in the second half of the 20th century. In the same year Chidester (1996a), furthermore, published an article, in which he examined Coca-Cola as a modern American and global fetish – material that he used and incorporated into his book *Authentic fakes: Religion and American popular culture* (2005).

I will argue, on the basis of a close reading of Chidester's (1996b) analysis of the anchor in *Savage systems* and of Coca-Cola and Tupperware in *Authentic fakes*, that the material turn in Religious Studies should not stop with the recognition that the sacred is necessarily present in concrete things in the world, but that it would still crucially need critical theory to assess the political, social and economic uses of these objects in religions as well as in the comparative study of religions. The material turn, in short, should not preclude the possibility of a systemic critique, but should continue to expose power relations at work in the uses of such objects in religions, the comparison of religions and in the comparative study of religions. What, we should finally ask, are the moral implications of this turn in the way we speak about religions in our comparative explorations?

## An anchor as 'fetish'

Chidester (1996b:75–78) begins his analysis of an anchor by comparing three accounts, one each from a Protestant missionary, a German traveller and a government official around 1800. According to the earliest report by J.T. van der Kemp in 1800, the first missionary from the London Missionary Society to Xhosa-speakers in the Eastern Cape, an anchor from a shipwreck was lying near the mouth of the Keiskamma river. Around 1780 the indigenous ruler of the area instructed one of his subjects to cut off a piece of the anchor. The man, however, died shortly afterwards, upon which the indigenous people started to think of the anchor as having 'the power of punishing everyone who should treat it with disrespect' as well as having 'some dominion

over the sea'. Reconciliation with the anchor, they thought, could be established by 'honouring' it 'with a peculiar name' and by 'saluting' it when passing by. This display of strange awe, a curious mixture of fear and respect, for an anchor indicated to Van der Kemp the superstitious character of the Xhosa-speakers of the Eastern Cape, and was taken by him as conclusive evidence of their lack of true religion (Chidester 1996b:75–76).

The German traveller, Lichtenstein, who toured the Eastern Cape between 1803–1806, similarly concluded from the way Xhosa-speakers regarded the anchor as a magical object that they lacked religion and were 'addicted to the grossest superstition'. After the person who had broken off a piece of the anchor had died, he reported, the indigenous people had 'immediately considered [*the anchor*] enchanted' and as having 'power over the sea'. They thought that the anchor was angry at the offence of having a piece removed from it, and consequently gave the anchor a name and saluted it when passing by (Chidester 1996b:77).

The third report on the anchor came from Alberti, the magistrate of the area, who submitted it to the party of the Cape's Dutch governor, when the latter visited the Eastern Cape in 1803 to end a devastating war by means of a peace treaty with the Xhosa chief Ngqika, the grandson of the chief who had originally instructed a subject to cut or break off a piece of the anchor. Like the Protestant missionary and the German traveller, Alberti concluded that the strange behaviour of honouring an anchor clearly indicated that the Xhosa lacked religion, and that superstition had a profound hold on them (Chidester 1996b:78).

If these European observers in the Eastern Cape around 1800 then assumed a basic distinction between their own Protestant religion and the Xhosa-speakers' superstition, by taking the anchor as evidence of a lack of religion and an indication of superstition amongst the indigenous people, one should further ask about the possible meaning of the anchor for the Xhosa people themselves in their historical, geographic and political context. Chidester (1996b:78–84) argues that the opposition between sea and land provides a plausible hermeneutical key. Both Van der Kemp and Lichtenstein mentioned that the Xhosa associated the anchor with 'dominion over the sea' (Chidester 1996b:83). In 1815 another missionary, John Campbell, reported that Ngqika killed survivors of shipwrecks, and that when asked by the colonial magistrate why he did it, Ngqika answered that the European colonisers did not belong to his land, but to the sea from which they came and where they should have stayed (Chidester 1996b:82). By the 1850s we furthermore know that in Zulu a myth of creation indicated the opposition between land and sea and was linked to the Supreme Being's separate creation of black and white people, with the land assigned to black people and the sea to white people (Chidester 1996b:83). The ritual behaviour towards the anchor, Chidester therefore surmises, may within this context have carried a sense of political resistance to colonial invasion of indigenous land for the indigenous Xhosa people, and certainly not the sense

<sup>2</sup>The brackets are from Houtman and Meyer (2012:6) to refer to both 'materiality as part of religion' and 'materiality as part of the study of religion.'



that the European observers had attributed to it (Chidester 1996b:83).

The function of the European denial of a Xhosa religion around 1800 on the colonial frontier of the Eastern Cape is according to Chidester (1996b:85–86) clear: It presented an empty field into which the Protestant Christian mission could insert itself. It also, by using the binary of religion versus superstition, projected the European Protestant polemic against Catholic superstition, magic, worship of the dead and objects, onto Xhosa beliefs and practices in the Eastern Cape.

Of critical importance to Chidester is the insight that these categories, which emerged in the polemics of Protestants versus Catholics in Europe, came to be used as primary terms throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th century in the comparative study of African religion. Chidester (1996b) states:

Imagining it as suffused with superstition and magic, rather than with genuine religious thought or feeling, European comparativists represented African religion as the worship of the dead, referring to the importance of ritual veneration directed towards the ancestors, and the worship of objects, whether that worship was termed by European scholars as *fetishism*, *animism*, or *totemism*. (p. 86)

In the last chapter of *Savage systems* Chidester (1996b:243–253) returns to the anchor to show how the reports from around 1800 by European observers in the Eastern Cape were reinterpreted in the emerging disciplines of comparative Religious Studies and Anthropology in the second half of the 19th century. Instead of interpreting the possible meaning of the anchor for Xhosa speakers within its original geographical, historical and political context as suggested by Chidester above, these theoreticians in European academic centres, by introducing significant changes to their sources, *decontextualised* the object – an interpretive strategy that enabled them to construct their general theories about the origin and evolution of religion.

About 70 years after Lichtenstein, John Lubbock, in London, used Lichtenstein's account of the anchor in adapted form. By eliminating specific references to place, time and political context he argued that the Xhosa people represented the first two stages in his theory of the evolution of religion. Humanity, according to Lubbock, moved from atheism to fetishism, from fetishism to totemism, from totemism to idolatry, and eventually culminated in correct creeds and ideas. The Xhosa-speaking people took that first evolutionary step, when they moved from ascribing life to an inanimate object (similar to what, according to Lubbock, dogs seem to be doing) to deifying the object (the moment at which, according to Lubbock, religion was born) (Chidester 1996b:244–246).

In 1896 the Dutch historian of religion, C.P. Tiele, often considered one of the founders of the discipline of comparative Religious Studies, presented the Gifford lectures to a British audience. He dramatically retold and adapted the story of

the anchor to support his view that the Xhosa represented a primitive mentality similar to the fears and hopes of children, thus reinforcing 'the frontier stereotype of "savages" as permanent children' (Chidester 1996b:247). He furthermore sensed that the anchor as well as the British and Dutch flags functioned as fetishes, but considered the latter as noble and worship of those powerful imperial objects by the colonised as proper and natural.

In the same year Frank Byron Jevons published a highly popular introduction to the history of religion, in which he used the anchor as evidence for the inability of primitive people to think logically. Instead of ascribing death to natural causes, they imagined death to be caused by a magical object. If the anchor indicated a lack of religion to Van der Kemp, Lichtenstein and Alberti, it now represented to Jevons – almost 100 years later – the absence of science, a distinction that reappeared in 1906 in the anthropologist Alfred Haddon's theory of the psychological evolution of primitive mentality (Chidester 1996b:249–250).

In concluding his tracing of the legacy of the anchor, Chidester (1996b:250–253) holds that the distinctions produced by European observers and theorists – between religion and superstition, civilised and primitive, science and magic – played a critical role in South Africa under apartheid. His brief look at the Afrikaner anthropologist and apartheid theorist, W.E. Eiselen, who eventually became administrator in the Bantu Affairs Department, shows how African beliefs and practices were not really considered religion, but were assumed to be the primitive origin of the evolution of religion (Chidester 1996b:252–253). To guide indigenous people to the next level of Christian civilisation, it was argued, they needed Christian education. The binary between science and primitive magic however, served to justify the dispossession and exploitation of Africans, who were considered to lack the ability to use agricultural methods in a rational way like the Afrikaans-speaking farmers (Chidester 1996b:253).

I started with Houtman and Meyer's (2012) contention that Religious Studies, due to a Protestant bias against material things, has since its emergence in the second half of the 19th century focused on beliefs rather than practices, and that the recent turn towards materiality provides an urgent corrective to that one-sided emphasis. Later in that essay, however, they qualify that claim by stating that in spite of this dematerialising tendency in the study of religion, the discipline has nevertheless provided us with 'a long-standing repertoire of categories', such as totem, idol and fetish – analytical concepts that have indeed not been value neutral. These terms do not simply refer to 'distinct types of material objects but rather to particular human attitudes toward and modes of using "things"' (Houtman & Meyer 2012:14).

In the case of the fetish, the term has carried a pejorative sense since its invention and use by the Portuguese in their trading with indigenous black people on the West coast of Africa in the late 15th century. In European languages according to Houtman and Meyer (2012) the term:



was adopted ... and mobilized to mark the difference between those who falsely mistake a mere thing as being imbued with power and agency, on the one hand, and those who are able to distinguish persons from objects (and to use the latter adequately), on the other. (p. 15)

Houtman and Meyer (2012:15–16) hold that:

Until today ... the notion of the fetish has been invoked to identify an irrational attitude toward a 'thing', whether by a neurotic to be cured through psychoanalysis, or by workers, who are to transcend their 'false consciousness' and realize that commodities are the products of their own work. (p. 16)

However, when invoked as suggested by Walter Benjamin, Houtman and Meyer (2012) continue to explain that:

the term *fetish* no longer describes a false attitude toward things by some primitive other but is situated in the midst of modernity, pointing toward the seductive lure of the things under whose spell we find ourselves. Commodities shape desire within a logic of enchantment, through which consumers generate personal authenticity by consuming things. (pp. 15–16)

## The 'fetishes' of Coca-Cola and Tupperware

In *Authentic fakes: Religion and American popular culture*, Chidester (2005:30–63) engages with these perspectives in his analysis of material objects in American popular culture, specifically of Coca-Cola and Tupperware. Popular culture, he argues, might be seen as a kind of religion, not only because its participants often view it as such, but also because classic academic definitions would justify the inclusion of popular culture under the category of 'religion'. If the formation of a unified community, the desire for sacred objects (or 'fetishes') and ritualised gift-giving constitute three models of religion, Coca-Cola would qualify on the basis of its being desired as an object in the United States of America (USA) as well as globally, whilst Tupperware is to be included under the category of 'religion' since it involves all three of these aspects.

In the case of Coke Chidester (2005) states, the desired object symbolises:

the American way of life, a way of life that is celebrated at the pilgrimage site of the World of Coca-Cola in Atlanta, Georgia, but [*that*] has also been diffused throughout the world (p. 34).

As an extraordinary material object that is intensely desired, Coca-Cola 'recalls the importance of icons, relics and other sacred objects in the history of religions', (Chidester 2005:34) whilst its global spread through advertising campaigns reminds one of the missionary zeal under colonialism.

A benign assessment, as advanced by Mark Pendergrast (2000) in *For God, country, and Coca-Cola*, appreciates the invention of this sacred object at the end of the 19th century in America and its global spread during the second half of the 20th century as contributing to meaning and value in the world, notably to long-lasting and inclusive values 'such as

love, peace, and universal brotherhood' (Pendergrast cited in Chidester 2005:35).<sup>3</sup> John Tomlinson (1991) similarly maintains that:

if goods are actually desired by people rather than imposed on them by force, then their entry into global markets should be regarded not as cultural imperialism, but as 'the spread of modernity'. (cited in Chidester 2005:136–137)

Chidester's (2005:137–138) response to this sympathetic assessment of the 'Cocacolonization' of the world is twofold. Firstly, it misrepresents the actual hierarchical power relations that are at work in its diffusion. Chidester (2005) suggests that:

Like the Bible, the cross, and European styles of housing, clothing and weapons in other colonial situations of Christian missionary intervention, Coca-Cola marks fundamental oppositions, signifying the slash between primitive and civilized, traditional and modern, communist and capitalist. (p. 137)

Thus a popular image in Saudi Arabia showing Muslims bowing in prayer towards Mecca, but simultaneously before a red Coca-Cola vending machine; or in Atlanta depicting Tibetan Buddhists in traditional robes with surprised expressions at discovering this modern American drink, served the function of reinforcing asymmetrical stereotypes. Most poignant was the photographic depiction of fur-hatted soldiers drinking Coca-Cola on Red Square after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was meant to signify Russia's 'conversion from primitive communism to modern capitalism' (Chidester 2005:137).

But secondly, once one has acknowledged the unequal coercive power of American imperialism, Chidester insists, one needs to appreciate the agency of local subjects in their finding of ways to re-appropriate the object from elsewhere for and within their local context. Argentinians may, for example, even come to see Coca-Cola as of their own making! Local appropriations may indeed be 'beyond the control of corporate headquarters in the United States' (Chidester 2005:138).

In the case of Tupperware, which is a desired consumer product, not only constitutes the focal point of a unified community in awe of it, but is also exchanged in rituals of gift-giving. Combining the three aspects of sociality, materiality and exchange, this example of American popular culture thus deserves in Chidester's (2005:53–54) view to be included and studied under the category of 'religion'.

Its myth of origin imagined Earl Tupper's invention of Tupperware in 1942 as a miracle, in which an industrial waste product was transformed by an alchemist into an extraordinary object. The successful marketing and selling of the product, however, only took off in the early 1950s when Brownie Wise invented a social base for it – the Tupperware party, managed by women within the most sacred American space of the home (Chidester 2005:56). Quoting the sociologist Dorothy Preven, Chidester (2005)

<sup>3</sup>See Pendergrast (2013) where he discusses his book and its reception.





aptly summarises the domestic rituals that not only unified a community of women, but also came to function as a rite of passage into womanhood:

chairs are carefully arranged so that 'guests face the product as if on an altar.' ... hosts present the plastic items with 'religious zeal', ... demanding 'reverence', 'awe', and 'respect'. (p. 56)

As the sales of the fetish expanded, Brownie Wise established the headquarters for Tupperware in Orlando, Florida, declaring it a sacred pilgrimage site for Tupperware dealers and sanctifying 'a small body of water ... by throwing a handful of polyethylene pellets into it' – 'the sacred Poly Pond' to which dealers could come to be 'baptized' by touching its waters (Chidester 2005:58). Already in 1954 did she claim to have preserved a piece of the original industrial waste product of polyethylene, 'a sacred relic', which she took to sales rallies where dealers were invited to 'rub their hands on Poly, wish, and work like the devil' (Chidester 2005:57).

The promise of financial success, Tupperware's 'prosperity gospel' (Chidester 2005:58) through positive thinking and hard work was, however, also combined with a ritual of gift-giving at the home parties as well as the headquarters. The enterprise was thus portrayed as exemplary of love and kinship, which contributed further to its corporate success.

As it spread globally Tupperware was propagated and marketed as a blessing or service to humanity that would enhance the happiness of everybody. But in his assessment Chidester (2005:61) critically remarks that 'all of this global exchange, of course, is not really a "party"', since 'exchange is constrained by the realities of a global political economy in which many people – perhaps most people – cannot actually play.' It is by creating a sacred aura around a fetish like Tupperware that the impression is created 'that everyone can be included'. Once this asymmetry in global exchanges is underlined, Chidester (2005:60) holds, one indeed needs to acknowledge that the world has profoundly changed at local levels due to the influence of American popular culture, of which the diffusion of Tupperware may provide a pertinent example.

## Conclusion

### Assessing Chidester's contribution

Which innovative challenges does Chidester's comparative analysis of material objects as diverse and seemingly unrelated as an anchor on the one hand, and Coca Cola and Tupperware on the other hand, pose to the academic field of Religious Studies? I would elaborate the challenges under three overlapping and complementary points.

Chidester (2005) challenges us, in the first place, to expand *the analytical category of 'religion'* by including popular culture and its objects as part of the field of comparative Religious Studies. By tracing the genealogy of the concept of 'religion' he reveals not only the intellectual labour that it

took to finally acknowledge the status of African indigenous religions as on a par with world religions, but also urges us to now do the same for alternative religious movements and popular culture (Chidester 2005:9). All of these do the work of 'religion', he persuasively argues, as claimed by participants (emic or insider perspectives) as well as defined by intellectuals like Durkheim (2001) and Bataille (1985) (etic or analytical, outsider perspectives), in creating communal solidarity around desired objects and facilitating the exchange of gifts. Chidester's (2005) contribution is not only firmly located within current debates on the genealogy of 'religion' as an analytical concept constructed and used within colonial and postcolonial contexts,<sup>4</sup> but has also undoubtedly opened new avenues for research in Religious Studies by arguing that popular culture may be comparatively studied as serving the same functions as conventional religions.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, of those three aspects of religion (sociality, materiality and exchange), he challenges us to focus our analysis specifically on the *material things* through which religions are necessarily mediated. When the term 'fetish' is used to examine this dimension of religion, we need to constantly recall its genealogy. Chidester (2005:3, 153–157) finds particularly helpful the African American W.E.B. Du Bois's use of the concept in his attempts to interpret African history and religion.

Initially, in *The Negro* (1915), Du Bois accepted the evolutionary theory that located the fetishism of 'primitive people' at the bottom of the scale, from where religion would ascend through polytheism to culminate in monotheism. But instead of employing the term 'fetish' in the European sense as a term of contempt and degradation of Africans, he attempted to rehabilitate it as the very centre of authentic African indigenous religion and claimed that it was precisely this material aspect that survived as slaves crossed the Atlantic and converted to the black church.

Almost 25 years later, in *Black folk* (1939), Du Bois became much less confident about this continuity, and instead emphasised the radical disruption that the slave trade caused in kinship and communal relations as well as African religion.

In 1947, after two world wars and on the eve of the postcolonial period, Du Bois (1947) in revising his history of Africa in the service of a pan-African ideology, returned in *The world and Africa* to the notion of the fetish, but now to critically discard it as a concept to understand African religion. Invented and used by Europeans to denigrate and dehumanise Africans as primitive barbarians, it was implicated in the trading of slaves as commodities, and was therefore in his view now to be firmly rejected (Chidester 2005:3, 153–157).

Chidester (2005:4), however, holds that the term 'fetish' may still be constructively used in the comparative study of

4. Crucial analyses to which Chidester's contribution should here be related, include Asad (1993), Smith [1998] 2004, Masuzawa (2000), Fitzgerald (2000), Kwok (2012) and Riesebrodt (2011).

5. Exemplary of this new trend in Religious Studies are the analyses of Oprah Winfrey by Kathryn Lofton (2011) and of hip-hop by Monica Miller (2012).



religion, on condition that we consciously avoid using it in a pejorative and denigrating sense. We need to realise and acknowledge, he insists, that 'lively objects as focal points of desire, can create meaningful, religious worlds.' He arrives at this conclusion in debate with modern critical descendants of Marx and Freud, such as Adorno and Benjamin, which brings me to the final challenge that Chidester's analysis poses to contemporary Religious Studies.

Thus, thirdly, and most importantly in my view, Chidester challenges us to seriously engage with *the possibility – even the moral imperative – of a critique of unequal power relations* that are at work in religious negotiations and in the comparative study of religions. By values he has in mind not merely a judgment of individual morality, but of unjust and dehumanising political and economic systems of imperialism and capitalism – and of the relationship between the personal and the social (Chidester 2005:23).

He, furthermore, does not stop at a *description* of values implicated in the political economy of the sacred, but also takes a stand on it by engaging with critical theorists in the Marxist and Freudian tradition, who not only regarded the concept of the 'fetish' as a negative term against the West itself but also attempted to rehabilitate it in more creative ways.

In Horkheimer and Adorno (1973), for example, the capitalist mass production and global dissemination of popular culture and its objects leave subjects no choice but to accept it as the only available possibility. It should, therefore, in their view be exposed and critiqued as an oppressive and homogenising system.

Walter Benjamin, on the other hand, whilst acknowledging 'the capitalist control of mass-produced culture' (cited in Chidester 2005:21), appreciates the creative agency of indigenous subjects in reinterpreting and consuming objects from elsewhere with potential healing or redemptive effects.<sup>6</sup> As Houtman and Meyer (2012:16) put it, '[t]he term *fetish*', is here understood in a positive sense as 'pointing toward the seductive lure of the things under whose spell we find ourselves.' Commodities are seen as 'shap[ing] desire within a logic of enchantment, through which consumers generate personal authenticity by consuming things' (Houtman & Meyer 2012:15–16).

Chidester (2005:21), finally points out that there are cultural theorists who argue that 'the creative activity of interpretation

6. In an earlier work Chidester (2000a:538–539, 546–551) observed that the world economy in the 1990s shifted from being organised around production ('the productive economy of industrial capitalism' associated with 'the Protestant ethic of hard work, discipline, and this-worldly asceticism' [p. 546]) to being organised around consumption ('the postindustrial capitalist economy' with 'a different ethos', characterized as a 'Romantic ethic' [p. 546]). This meant that Christian goods and services – and I assume of other religions – came to be 'consumed much like other consumer products available on the market' (p. 539) a process aptly termed 'the commodification of the sacred (p. 539).' This shift towards a 'global consumer culture' (p. 539) simultaneously meant that Christianity (and I again assume other religions) 'increasingly appeared to be leisure-time activity, what Christians [and adherents of other religions] did for fun or fulfillment during their time off from the daily round of work (p. 539).' Chidester (2000a:546) concludes '[i]n this Romantic ethic, commodities had more than use value', since 'by stimulating the imagination and promising gratification of desires, the commodities that circulated in the modern economy of consumerism gave content to new personal and social identities.'

[is] itself a means of cultural production that takes place in the process of cultural consumption' and emphasises that 'subject positions' are 'vastly different ... grounded in race, ethnicity, social class, occupation, region, gender, sexual orientation, and so on', which may be mobilised to resist and oppose 'the hegemony of the dominant culture.' The latter, for its part, may or may not 'work to appropriate and assimilate [such alternative cultural formations] into the larger society.'

It is at this point that we should, in my view, press Chidester and ourselves, to explicitly argue our normative frameworks – whether in relationship to human rights discourses and practices and/or capabilities lists (as developed by Martha Nussbaum [2006, 2011] and Amartya Sen [2006, 2009] for United Nations development projects) that are to be implemented in political, legal and educational programmes to create conditions for human flourishing. To do this in a way that is sensitive to history and context, is the urgent task – the moral duty, I would say – of students of comparative religion today.<sup>7</sup>

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- 7. In Srijdom (2011) I argued with reference to human rights discourses and practices that Chidester's critique of colonial uses of religion and imperial religious studies should not preclude a critique of indigenous African religion in postcolonial contexts. In Srijdom (2012) I problematised uses of indigenous identities in postcolonial African contexts in dialogue with Chidester.



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