

A Postcolonial and Material Theory of Knowledge for the Study of Religion: A Comparison of Durkheim and Chidester's Epistemologies¹

Johan M. Strijdom
strijdm@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

This article addresses the fundamental question of how knowledge about religion is acquired in the academic study of religion. It does so by means of a comparison of the answers to the question by Emile Durkheim and David Chidester. Durkheim, in engaging with the conventional distinction between rationalist and empiricist theories of knowledge of his time, as well as their combination by Kant, argues that categories of thought (such as space, time, causality, number, and classifications) are not mere abstract conditions of understanding, but are to be conceptualized as constructs of particular societies. This social-anthropological shift in the theory of knowledge has been of decisive influence since the beginning of the 20th century, among others on the late 20th-century and beginning of the 21st-century South African scholar of religion, David Chidester. From a comparison of Durkheim's epistemology with that of Chidester it is, however, clear that the latter brings new insights to the epistemological question by insisting on a postcolonial and material approach to the study of religion. The comparison of the two epistemologies that I provide here should give substance to this point by comparing ways in which they deal with a selection of categories and concepts in their study of religion.

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Introduction

How do we know what we know? More specifically, how do we know what we know about religion, that is, how do we gain and produce knowledge about religion? Taking this as the fundamental epistemological question that is applicable to the academic study of religion, I will attempt to shed light on the question by comparing the answers of Emile Durkheim and David Chidester to it in their study of religion.

Inspired by the thesis of J.Z. Smith (2004; 2005) on the value of comparison, I will assume that the purpose of comparison of two case studies is not comparison itself, but the expectation that each case study might shed light on the other and enable us to see the issue itself anew². Importantly, appreciating Smith's argument on how a productive comparison of two cases on a central issue should proceed, I will here first closely follow each theorist's views on the epistemological question before a comparison is made.

The two theorists chosen for comparison have both made important contributions to the academic study of religion. At the beginning of the 20th century, Emile Durkheim published *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: Le système totémique en Australie* (Durkheim [1912] 1968), soon translated as *The elementary forms of the religious life* (Durkheim 1915), which has become a classical text in the sociology of religion³. Towards the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century, David Chidester has published several books that have been acknowledged as milestones in the

² For a discussion of Smith's proposal on a productive comparative method, see Strijdom (2021).

³ Other notable translations of Durkheim's seminal book include those by Cosman (Durkheim [2001] 2008) and Fields (Durkheim 1995). Smith (2005:9) prefers Swain's translation as 'still...more like Durkheim than any other English translation'. Capps (1995:159), in his history of the academic study of religion, considers Durkheim's *Elementary forms* 'still...a landmark in sociological theory as well as within the history of the academic study of religion'.

material and postcolonial study of religion⁴ – an intellectual journey that he has summarized by means of key analytical terms in *Religion: Material dynamics* (Chidester 2018)⁵.

The question to be considered here concerns the extent to which a comparison of their theories of knowledge in their study of religion may shed light on the epistemological question as formulated above.

Emile Durkheim on the Epistemological Question in his Study of Religion

In his survey of Durkheim's *Elementary forms*, Robert Alun Jones (1986: 115)⁶ holds that if Durkheim's primary purpose with this book was to describe and explain the earliest form of religion, its secondary purpose was far more ambitious in attempting 'to provide sociological answers to philosophical questions'.

These philosophical questions concern the fundamental categories by means of which humans understand and know the world. Among the necessary and universal categories of thought Aristotle included 'time, space, class, number, cause, substance, [and] personality', from which human understanding cannot – as Durkheim puts it – 'liberate itself...without destroying itself, [since] it seems that we cannot think of objects that are not in time and space, which have no number, etc.' (Jones 1986:115).

In arguing his own social-anthropological proposal, Durkheim then proceeds in his characteristic argumentative way by engaging and problematizing the answers that rationalists and empiricists gave to the epistemological question. In terms of this broad map, rationalist philosophers since Descartes held that the categories were innate and preceded experience (i.e., they were *a priori*), whereas empiricist philosophers since Locke maintained that the

⁴ For a contextualization of Chidester's work and its reception, see Strijdom and Scharnick-Udemans (2018).

⁵ Chidester (2018:xii) states that *Religion: Material dynamics* 'consolidates what I have learned over forty years of studying religion'.

⁶ In following Smith's insistence that the argument of Durkheim rather than only his conclusions needs to be closely followed, Jones (1986) has been particularly helpful to do this for my purposes here.

categories were acquired and constructed in the mind by means of experience (i.e., they were acquired *a posteriori*).

Against the empiricists, Durkheim objects that they deprive the categories of their *universality* and *necessity* (i.e., that the categories are generally applicable everywhere and always, without which human beings are not able to think), if the categories are based on and constructed from contingent experience. Against the rationalists, he argues that although they recognize the universality and necessity of the categories in claiming that they are naturally innate in humans, they fail to consider the more interesting question of how the categories get their content *necessarily* within particular social contexts.

In presenting his own epistemological theory on the social origin of the categories as an answer between these two theses, and as an attempt to take Kant's combination of rationalist and empiricist theories of knowledge further, Durkheim argues that the distinction between individual and social representations would explain the universality and necessity of the categories. The categories of understanding cannot be left to individual perceptions through the senses, since society necessarily requires a shared moral and logical conformity between individuals in order to safely preserve itself.

If this seems like a return to empiricism, Durkheim gives, as Jones (1986:115) puts it, a 'rationalist and rather metaphysical answer...that society is part of nature'. In Durkheim's words, nature cannot 'differ radically from itself...The fundamental relations that exist between things – just that which is the function of the categories to express – cannot be essentially dissimilar in the different realms' (Durkheim 1915:19).

In the course of describing the beliefs and practices of Australian aboriginal religion which, according to him, as earliest known religion contained the basic elements of all religions⁷, Durkheim illustrates his theory that the general categories of thought originate from society by focusing particu-

⁷ Durkheim's definition of religion is based on his argument that a totemist stage of religion preceded the worship of nature (naturism) or the worship of spirits (animism) (for a discussion, cf. Strijdom 2021; Strijdom [forthcoming]). All religions would share the elements of this earliest totemic religion, whose sacred beliefs and ritual practices served the social function of uniting adherents. The sacred in Durkheim's definition thus does not assume a transcendental referent, but refers to all things considered special or extraordinary in distinction to things considered ordinary or profane by the group. It is this working definition that he would employ in his scientific, empirically based analysis of the social facts of religion.

larly on the categories of time, place, cause, and classification. Importantly, Durkheim argues, if religion is nothing but society worshipping itself, these categories would be found to be a product of representations in the religious thought of social groups.

As far as the category of *class* is concerned, with the universal function of the human mind to classify perceived things, the binary *classification* of things into sacred versus profane is, according to Durkheim's assessment of the ethnographic record of his time⁸, basic to the thinking of central Australian aboriginal groups, and maintained by means of prohibitions that are ritually enacted to prevent the sacred from being contaminated by the profane. As far as a particular totemic animal, or less frequently, plant, is sacred to a particular clan, it serves as name and emblem to distinguish the clan from others. Shared totems of tribes and phratries would again serve to give a social identity to these larger groups in distinction from other groups.

Ritually, the unity of the group is secured by forbidding the killing and eating of the totemic animal, except at certain periodic effervescent ceremonies. In the case of the Arunta – the aboriginal people that Durkheim focuses on – the group's *temporal rhythm* is marked by a special collective ritual that separates within their central Australian physical environment or *space* the long, dry profane season from the short, rainy, sacred season. This ceremony during the sacred time and space concludes with a sacrifice during which the totem animal is slaughtered and eaten in a joyous meal by the group to reaffirm their social identity.

Both the totem and the group are thus attributed with sacredness, constituting a *class* that is ritually reaffirmed periodically within its concrete spatial environment, to distinguish it from other groups with their totems. Jones (1986:120) aptly captures Durkheim's argument: In totemism 'one of the essential "categories of the understanding" – the idea of class – appears to be the product of certain forms of social organization, [and] since all of these beliefs clearly imply a division of things, between sacred and profane...they are surely the most elementary forms of the religious life'⁹.

⁸ Durkheim's main source was *Native tribes of central Australia* by Spencer and Gillen (1899).

⁹ For Durkheim's use of the concept of *mana* as impersonal force that adherents of the earliest religions believed to diffuse sacred things, see the critique of Smith (2004).

As far as the category of *cause* is concerned, with the universal function of the human mind to discern cause-effect relations between perceived things, Durkheim argues that its origin can be found in the collective representations of the earliest religious thought, with its belief in the diffused effect of the impersonal force of *mana* in sacred things and the efficacy of imitative ritual performances. Durkheim, furthermore, holds that the more recent scientific ‘law of causality’ should be regarded as in continuity with and originating from religious thought, since in both cases the *a priori* idea is that an active cause will necessarily produce an effect.

Although religion and science are both social constructs, and as such the same in kind by classifying and relating things causally, science – including the social-scientific study of religion – does in Durkheim’s view, advance by being a ‘more perfect form of religious thought’ (Jones 1986:123). At this point Durkheim underlines the importance of taking emic concepts seriously, but in the process conflates *concepts* with the *categories* of understanding – a confusion that has been problematized, since although both categories and concepts have their origin in society and can be viewed as collective representations, concepts should be regarded as the *content* of the mind rather than as *capacities* of the mind (Jones 1986:154, agreeing with Lukes 1972). The distinction between emic and etic concepts also needs further elaboration. We will consider the pertinence of this distinction between *categories* of understanding and analytical *concepts* for the epistemological question, as we now turn to Chidester.

David Chidester on the Epistemological Question in his Study of Religion

Chidester (2018:19) argues, ‘As a class of things or people with shared characteristics, a category is a necessary feature of thinking. No categories, no thinking. But where do our categories come from? How do they work? What do they do? How can we rethink our basic modes of thinking?’

These are Chidester’s opening statements and questions to his discussion of ‘categories’ that he has employed in his study of religion. Instead of understanding ‘categories’ as universal and necessary conditions of human knowledge, Chidester here gives the term the meaning of ‘concepts’. Already in the *Introduction* to his book, *Religion: Material dynamics*, Chidester

(2018:3) states that the study of religion has in the last few decades ‘moved away from...any Kantian notion of a priori categories, [and has instead focused on] the historical contingencies of religion’s production and deployment as a category’.

Of particular interest to Chidester are categories/concepts that can be given theoretical depth for analytical purposes and applied to case studies in order to produce innovative knowledge about religion and religions¹⁰. Reflecting elsewhere on the expectation of postgraduate students to not merely *consume* existing knowledge about religion, but to *produce* new knowledge about religion, Chidester (2013) underlines the importance to ‘experiment’ with theories and methods from the humanities and social sciences to achieve this objective. As he puts it:

By engaging in the alchemy of theory and data – in which theory without data is empty, but data without theory is blind – they [post-graduate students] must produce something original. For originality, they can look at something new in an old way, or they can look at something old in a new way; but they cannot use the phrase ‘look at’ when they formulate the rationale for their research. New knowledge is not produced out of merely looking at something, but requires theoretically informed and methodologically rigorous engines of argumentation, interpretation, explanation, or analysis (Chidester 2013:7).

In his own experimentation to produce new knowledge about religion and religions, Chidester has found *material* terms/concepts the most useful. In a review of Taylor’s collection of ‘critical terms’ for the academic study of religion (Taylor 1998), with contributions by diverse authors, Chidester (2000: 367-370) distinguishes between terms that are useless to produce new knowl-

¹⁰ Chidester accepts the common distinction between ‘religion’ as *genus*, and ‘religions’ as *species* or examples of the generic term. This distinction is already explained in Chidester (1987:3): ‘The term *religion* designates a general class of human beliefs, practices, and experiences; religions are particular subspecies of that class. Religions, or religious traditions, are identified as particular illustrations of the general class of religion, just as apples, oranges, pears and bananas might be subspecies of the general class, fruit’.

edge about religion (particularly Christian theological ones)¹¹, and those that are useful to achieve this objective, notably anthropological key terms that consider religion to be ‘a human product, a human project, and a human problem, [asking] what it is to be a human person in a human place?’ (Chidester 2000:374).

If modern thought has dematerialized religion by considering it as an interior, spiritual realm of individual belief¹², profoundly influencing imperial and colonial studies of religion, the academic study of religion now needs to not only understand this legacy but also refocus its approach by theorizing and applying *material* terms, attending in its analysis to material mediations of religion, as humans necessarily and inevitably engage objects and the bodily senses and perform embodied rituals, within political and economic power relations of gender, class, and race – a process that is characterized by surprising movements and changes under ever changing historical conditions and forces.

Beginning his discussion of ‘categories’ with ‘religion’ as the most pertinent concept in the study of religion, Chidester critically engages with the concept of *animism* in E.B. Tylor’s theory (Tylor [1871] 1977) of religion as ‘belief in spiritual beings’ before he turns to the concept of the *sacred* in Durkheim’s definition of religion.

¹¹ Chidester (2000:374) finds it ‘hard to see what is gained by going around in a... theological circle’, when it is argued that because Christian theology has been so influential in the study of religion, it has inescapably set the terms for the study of religion, or if one develops an alternative humanistic theory and method, it would be simply ‘a secularized version of theology’.

¹² Chidester (2000:376), quoting Gustavo Benavides’ contribution to the volume, highlights that in reconstructing a genealogy of dematerialized religion, one needs to understand that it was the early modern European ‘differentiation of domains... to police new boundaries...that separated the spiritual from the physical, reinforcing, in the process, an increasingly disembodied, interiorized religion’. Chidester, furthermore, emphasizes that due to colonization, this separation also had a profound effect on imperial and colonial conceptualizations of a dematerialized ‘primitive mentality’ and dematerialized religion of colonized peoples. This genealogy of a disembodied, spiritualized concept of religion should finally be understood as part of nationalist projects, whether in Europe celebrating the spiritual resources of nationalism, or in Asia promoting the idea of its spiritual excellence.

Thinking from a South African location, Chidester shows how Tylor has produced his intellectualist, evolutionary theory of *animism* by abstracting and distorting data on Zulu dreams that he read in reports from the colonial missionary, Callaway, who in his turn had obtained his information from the Zulu convert, Mbande. By tracing this process of triple mediation under colonial conditions from a postcolonial location, Chidester has been able to move the debate away from an intra-European debate to shed new light on the way knowledge was produced and still has lingering effects on the production of knowledge in the academic study of religion¹³.

With Durkheim, whom Chidester considers to be one of the major influences on his study of religion¹⁴, the *sacred* as central concept of religion does not assume a transcendental referent, but refers to shared extraordinary beliefs and practices ‘set apart’ with the function to unite a group of adherents. However, if the binary sacred-profane constitutes for Durkheim the most fundamental classification, Chidester emphasizes that the opposition is not absolute, since the profane or ordinary may also be made sacred by intense interpretation and regular ritualization by adherents. Chidester has thus been able to take Durkheim’s notion further by expanding the concept of religion to include in his analysis objects such as hair and the vuvuzela, Coca-Cola and Tupperware, McDonald’s and Walt Disney, Rock ‘n Roll, and the World Cup that all function like a religion, always within changing cultural, political, and economic contexts¹⁵. Not simply uniting adherents, as Durkheim’s functionalist theory held, beliefs and practices might be contested and create conflict. Religion creates not only social boundaries in different degrees between insiders and outsiders, but also power hierarchies within and between groups.

When Chidester turns to orientation in space and time as key concepts to study material religion, his focus is not on these as universal and nec-

¹³ See Strijdom (2021) for a comparison of Tylor’s animism in Durkheim and Chidester.

¹⁴ Chidester (2012:xii) traces back his academic study of religion through Smith and Charles Long ‘ultimately to Emile Durkheim’s sociology of the sacred, all refracted, however, by my experience of living and working since 1984 in South Africa during a world-historical transition from oppression to liberation’.

¹⁵ The argument that popular culture behaves like a religion is the focus of Chidester’s *Authentic fakes: Religion and American popular culture* (Chidester 2005).

essary categories of thought in modern epistemological debates, but on the *content* that can be given to these concepts for critical analysis to produce new knowledge about religion. In debate with Van der Leeuw's concept of sacred space as manifestation of a transcendental power and his phenomenological description of its characteristic pattern, Chidester pleads for a *critical* phenomenology that would not mystify sacred space, but instead foreground the power relations at work, which he illustrates by analyzing the Voortrekker Monument and Freedom Park as sacred places within their historical contexts¹⁶.

We may continue by following Chidester's conceptualization of time and rituals, the importance of incongruity between categories, their intersection with political and economic formations, the genealogy of the fetish and cargo as material concepts to analyze economic exchange, economics behaving like a religion including the role of cultural symbols, the mobility and historical change of people, objects, and concepts, such as the cross-cultural concept of shamanism from Eliade to environmental concerns, or the Zulu diviner, Credo Mutwa moving from Apartheid to cyberspace, and white sangomas in the diaspora traveling in their dreams from North America back to South Africa, or the sense of touch theorized as embrace or concussion. These are creative and wide-ranging interventions that Chidester (2018) discusses in *Religion: Material dynamics*, with frequent references to his earlier work, and that deserves thorough engagement – more than I can note here. What I have captured on Chidester above should, however, suffice for our comparative argument here.

Comparison and Conclusion

How do we know what we know? How do we know what we know about religion? I highlight four overlapping points that might shed light on these questions from a comparison between the epistemologies of Durkheim and Chidester.

First, categories and concepts: Durkheim engages in debate with and combines the views of empiricists and rationalists on categories in the mind of all human beings that make it possible for humans to know, but also fills concepts such as religion and the sacred as well as myths and rituals with

¹⁶ For a discussion of Chidester's debate with Van der Leeuw, see Strijdom (2024).

content for analytical purposes. Chidester, unlike Durkheim, does not show an interest in categories in the sense of universal capacities of the human mind that make understanding possible. However, like Durkheim he appreciates categories as concepts that can be filled with theorized content and used to produce new knowledge about religion and religions.

Second, social-anthropological concepts: Both Durkheim and Chidester insist on the importance of using concepts from the humanities and social sciences rather than theology to analyze religion as a human, collective phenomenon. By ‘looking at’ religion *through this lens* within particular communities, places, and times, new knowledge on what it means to be human and a social being in relation to others might be produced in the academic study of religion.

Third, material concepts: Durkheim’s definition of religion is based on his argument for a pre-animistic phase of religion, which was characterized by *totemic* beliefs and effervescent ritual practices. With this prominence of the totem, Durkheim may be regarded as a precursor of the recent material turn in the study of religion that focuses on objects and the senses as necessary mediations of all religions¹⁷. With Chidester, however, material terms, filled with theoretical depth for analytical purposes, become much more pronounced as Durkheim’s definition of the sacred is considerably expanded to include for material analytic forms of popular culture.

Finally, postcolonial critique: Although Durkheim does not denigrate indigenous Australian religion but considers it to contain the elementary forms of all religions, he does not offer a critique of the racist presuppositions at the basis of evolutionary theories of religion under European imperialism¹⁸. Chidester, however, has retold the history of the academic study of religion by foregrounding these asymmetrical relations in the triple mediation of imperial theory formations in an attempt to prevent their continuation in the academic study of religion. This new perspective on knowledge production about religion has importantly been made possible by Chidester’s immigration from the USA to South Africa, which afforded him a postcolonial loca-

¹⁷ See Strijdom (forthcoming) on the totem in Durkheim’s theory of religion.

¹⁸ Although he does not focus on race and postcolonial critiques, Jones (1986:154) aptly notes that Durkheim ignored ‘the way religion functions in social conflict and asymmetrical relations of power’.

tion to redescribe and critically reassess colonial and Apartheid studies of religion.

It is with this combination of material terms given theoretical depth and postcolonial critique from a South African location, I maintain, that Chidester has made a crucial contribution to the epistemological question in the academic study of religion that he illustrated with extensive analyses of examples from South African history. We will do well to take this further, as I have argued elsewhere¹⁹, by making explicit the ethical frameworks by which we develop our critiques.

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¹⁹ See e.g., Strijdom (2023).

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Prof. Johan M. Strijdom
ORCID link: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0541-6385>
Department of Religious Studies and Arabic
University of South Africa
Pretoria
strijm@unisa.ac.za