Frontier Zones and the Study of Religion[1]

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'The study of religion, as I understand it, is a critical and creative enterprise.
While the criticism of religion, as Karl Marx proposed, is the beginning
of all criticism, the creative enterprise of imagining religion as a human project
opens new possibilities for understanding a diverse array of powerful discourses,
practices, and social formations that are underwritten
by claims on transcendence or the sacred'
(David Chidester 2018a:42)

Abstract

This article focuses on the concept of the frontier zone as a central critical term in Chidester's *oeuvre*. Understood as a site where difference is articulated, encountered, and governed, the frontier zone is a productive, insight-generating notion. Its usefulness pertains not only to the study of colonial settings in which scholarly knowledge *about* religion in Africa took shape via the introduction of religion as a category, but also to the study of religious

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plurality in contemporary European cities, which is here proposed to approach as new postcolonial frontier zones.

I met David Chidester for the first time in October 2005, in the context of the conference *Reasons of Faith* organized by the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER) at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Even though we were both scholars of religion, I did not know his writings, except that I had heard about his *Savage systems* (Chidester 1996). My ignorance can be partly explained by the fact that we were working in different circles, he in religious studies and I in anthropology. While the two disciplines share a common history, nowadays they stand quite apart, so much so that scholars trained in one do not necessarily know about work relevant to their research in the other. As I became aware of the extent to which Chidester's research interests and his impressive oeuvre resonated with many themes – the senses, authenticity, and materiality – that I was starting to discover and deploy at the time, I developed a keen interest in his work. In 2008, to my delight, I was able to persuade him to take part as an international advisor in a research project on heritage formation, where we co-supervised the thesis of Duane Jethro (2015) and took part in workshops organized by our program in Amsterdam, Accra and, of course, Cape Town[2]. My move in 2011 from a position in anthropology to one in religious studies prompted me to rethink the terms of the study of religion from a postsecularist, postcolonial, and material perspective. I then fully realized the brilliance of his idea to reconstruct the genesis of guiding concepts in the study of religion by tracing them back to the frontier zones of European imperial outreach. In this article in honor of his amazing work – driven by his ability to see the weird in what seems obvious, to write with dry wit and irony, to open up unexpected, twisting paths – I would like to concentrate on one particularly important concept in his thinking: The frontier zone. This is a productive, insight-generating concept,

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[2] One of the outcomes of that research project just appeared (Meyer & Van de Port 2018), which includes an essay by Chidester.

not only with regard to the study of colonial settings in which scholarly knowledge about religion took shape, but also, as I will argue, with regard to the study of religious plurality in contemporary postcolonial European metropolises.

The frontier zone

In his book *Savage systems*, Chidester situates the emergence of comparative religion as an academic discipline in Southern African frontiers, where it was 'a discourse and practice that produced knowledge about religion and religions, and thereby configured knowledge about the human, within the power relations of specific colonial situations' (Chidester 1996:2). As he points out, initial reports about Africa noted an absence of religion among the indigenous populations. This presumed absence was taken as an important legitimation for the depiction of African peoples as brutes and was both a barrier to European expansion and a rationale for their conquest. 'Before coming under colonial subjugation, Africans had no religion. After local control was established, however, they were found to have a religious system after all' (Chidester 1996:20), Chidester aptly summarizes his point. This 'discovery' of religion *de facto* meant the *invention* of religion as part of a new political-epistemic regime to organize and authorize the colonial governance of difference – not only with regard to people in Africa, but also other populations across the world. Gaining knowledge about the religions of others by comparison, presupposed the introduction of the category of religion from Western centers of knowledge production into the frontier zones of European imperial outreach. Knowledge about non-Westerners was couched in Western terms, which set the standard for translation and comparison and framed how the differences were understood. In this sense, the history of comparative religion as a discipline – just like anthropology – is much more imbued with the colonial project than many protagonists were – and possibly still are – prepared to admit (cf. also Van der Veer 2001). That 'the imperial science of comparative religion had completely obscured its entanglement in global conquest' (Chidester 1996:3) implied neglect of the context in which information about religion(s) was assembled on the level of theory formation. Actual encounters and conquests were stripped of their material and practical dimensions,

yielding a rather reductive concern with disembodied evidence of 'mentality, whether that mentality was designated as religious, magical, superstitious, or primitive' (Chidester 1996:3). The prime task for a critical study of religion is to throw light on this obscured history (cf. also Bergunder 2016). Unpacking the production and use of knowledge about religion on the Southern African frontier, *Savage systems* undertakes a critical retrieval of the science of comparative religion as a project entangled with colonialism. This is pursued in *Empire of religion* (Chidester 2014), which traces the process of 'triple mediation' – from so-called 'natives', to missionaries, to scholars – through which knowledge about religion was increasingly abstracted from the colonial context in which it was initially generated.

The notion of the frontier zone is at the heart of this critical endeavor. Chidester (1996:20-21) defines it as follows:

> I define a frontier zone as a zone of contact, rather than a line, a border, or a boundary. By this definition, a frontier is a region of intercultural relations between intrusive and indigenous people. Those cultural relations, however, are also power relations. A frontier zone opens with the contact between two or more previously distinct societies and remains open as long as power relations are unstable and contested, with no one group or coalition able to establish dominance. A frontier zone closes when a single political authority succeeds in establishing its hegemony over the area.

Introducing the frontier zone as a 'region of intercultural relations' in which indigenous and intrusive people interact, Chidester's point is not to essentialize cultural differences. As his extensive analysis shows, for him frontier zones are first and foremost fluid and messy. Doing comparative religion in the frontier zone was a simplifying endeavor, geared to reduce complexity: 'The conceptual organization of human diversity into rigid, static categories was one strategy for simplifying, and thereby achieving some cognitive control over, the bewildering complexity of the frontier zone' (Chidester 1996:21-22). Rather than being pre-existent, different 'cultures' and 'religions' were an *outcome* of contacts in the frontier zone, and knowledge about them was essential to the colonial management of difference and control. This was instrumental for the governance of difference and the politics of belonging in the apartheid regime.

For Chidester, the point for a contemporary critical study of religion is not a mere break with this mostly occluded history, but a journey 'back through the frontiers on which these categories were asserted, constituted, and contested' (Chidester 1996:29). This makes it possible to assess how religious studies and anthropology help to produce categories to classify difference via schemes and typologies (cf. also Fabian 1983). This was a pressing concern articulated in the European centers *vis-à-vis* the dazzling diversity people encountered in the context of imperial outreach, and central for the development of policies for colonial domination. In history and anthropology, much research has been conducted on the imposition of colonial rule, but religious studies is only beginning to unearth the legacy of colonialism for the discipline's own epistemological underpinnings. Chidester has played a central role in putting this on the agenda.

Taking the frontier zone as a site where difference is articulated, encountered, and governed, is a productive entry point for research. Importantly, for Chidester, multiplicity and relationality *precede* categorization and are never fully contained by it – and yet, the simplifying work of categorization that occurred in colonial frontier zones has tangible consequences, as categories became real forces in the politics of world making, as is testified most disturbingly by the apartheid system of governance. Once one takes the frontier zones where differences were negotiated in the colonial period as a starting point for research, it is possible to make visible the complex processes of categorization – sustained by scholarship in religious studies and anthropology – and their incorporation into political domination and governance. This, though, is not all. Chidester insists over and over again that the frontier zone also entails possibilities for encounters and practices of mixing and creative synthesis. The final sentences of *Savage systems* express this lucidly:

> As we have seen, a frontier zone is a zone of conflict, but it can also be a zone of reciprocal exchanges, creative interchanges, and unexpected possibilities. We might very well be faced with a frontier future. By going back through the history of situated comparisons to the frontier, it is possible that we might clear a space – perhaps even a postcolonial, postimperial, postapartheid space – where something new in the study of religion might happen (Chidester 1996:266).

A focus on frontier zones is therefore not only important for retrieving the history of comparative religion and the orders established through categorization; it also serves as a constant reminder that messy multiplicity is the default out of which cultural and religious distinctions are formed, and as an invitation to spot unexpected possibilities, as exemplified most markedly in his work on *Authentic fakes* (Chidester 2005) and *Wild religion* (Chidester 2012).

Africanist resonances

As noted, I discovered Chidester's work rather late, long after I had embarked in the early 1990s on historical and ethnographic work on the activities of German Protestant missionaries of the *Norddeutsche Missionsgesellschaft* (NMG) among the Ewe people in what is today Southern Ghana and Southern Togo. With hindsight, I realize that I analyzed their encounters in ways resonant with Chidester's approach to the frontier zone. Rather than study a traditional setting that was located as far away as possible from Western influences, the explicit aim was to explore the consequences of contacts between Westerners and Africans and their increasing entanglements under unequal power relations. This was part of a larger project of 're-inventing anthropology' (Hymnes 1972), which entailed a critical reflection on 'how anthropology makes its object' (Fabian 1983) through at-first-sight neutral epistemological operations. Of crucial importance here, as Johannes Fabian argues, is the use of time and space as categories through which a distance between anthropologists and their interlocutors is affirmed and their 'coevalness' is denied. There is a strong resonance between this critical anthropology and Chidester's approach, in that both combine constant critical interrogation of scholarly vocabularies and the underlying epistemologies with detailed historical and ethnographic research.

Studying the missionary ethnographic work on 'Ewe religion' and the NMG proselytization activities, as well as the ways Ewe people appropriated Christianity and related to the colonizing mission (Meyer 1999), there is much inspiration in Talal Asad's ground-breaking critique of the modern category of religion as being inflected with post-Enlightenment Protestant understandings (Asad 1993). This enabled me to spot the misrepresentations of 'Ewe religion'

entailed by analyzing it through the lens of a reductive, mentalistic approach to religion, according to which the relevance of practices, the body and the use of material things was downplayed or even dismissed as belonging to a 'heathen' religiosity that was to be surpassed in favor of Christian faith. In my work, I sought to not only problematize the epistemological limits of this modern category and its ideological use. Also, much in line with Chidester's approach, I wanted to trace the implications of the introduction of the category of 'religion' to the Ewe, as well as to other people groups in the area and across Africa, and to explore how this introduction yielded understandings of 'African traditional religion' as a fixed and coherent system modelled on the example of Christianity (cf. De Witte 2010; Meyer 2015:252-287).

In the process of reconfiguring myself as a scholar of religion, I re-read the historical materials of the NMG as refractory resources from the frontier zone, as defined by Chidester, that could be scrutinized for an alternative approach to religion from a material and corporeal angle (Meyer 2012). This has been central in my conceptual interventions since that time, my aim being a broader take on religion that is not reduced to its secularized, post-Enlightenment Protestant version, while being sensitive to the ways religion and associated terms were and still are employed in colonial and post-independence governance. The point is to follow the trajectory through which it was imposed, used, and popularized in global entanglements. Then past and present discourses about religion can be analyzed as resources that condense highly complex, contested encounters and troubled translations with regard to human-spirit relations in frontier zones of imperial outreach (cf. also Mbembe 2014; Tonda 2015). The widely used, casual expression 'study of religion in Africa', which I also long employed to describe my research, normalizes religion as part of African life. I think that it is time to study 'religion *from* Africa' (Meyer 2017)[3], so as to acknowledge that the possibility to say anything about religion *in* Africa requires taking into account the conditions and consequences of the introduction of this very term in the frontier zone. This is all the more important as Africa has been framed as the 'never secular' (Luhrmann 2012:371) continent *par excellence*, and Africans are often regarded as naturally, notoriously, and even incurably religious (Platvoet &

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[3] Obviously, this resonates with the project of *Theory from the south* (Comaroff & Comaroff 2012).

Van Rinsum 2002)[4]. Recalling Chidester's point that initially Africans were found to not have religion (see above), the irony of this qualification cannot be missed.

The rather positive reception of the missionaries by many Ewe might be likened to bringing in a Trojan horse, in that conversion had highly destabilizing repercussions that fundamentally shook traditional ways of living. Still, I have always found remarkable the initial preparedness of more and more Ewe to open up to the missionaries and allow – or even invite – them to set up posts with churches, schools, and trading posts. This may have been motivated by the striving to find out about and get access to hitherto unknown spiritual power resources in unstable times, as happened also in the case of the engagement with various cults coming from the north (Kramer 1993). This openness and preparedness to accommodate something from elsewhere, to the extent that priests destroyed their shrines and people fundamentally changed their lifestyle as a consequence of Christian conversion, testify to an intriguing attitude. It is at loggerheads with essentializing ideas about a pure ethnic, national or religious identity – alas very much *en vogue* in Europe at this moment – and works against efforts of simplification.

While I do not want to idealize this attitude, which may also be described as 'extraversion' (Bayart 2000), I think that it deserves further reflection as an alternative strategy to engage the multiplicity of the frontier zone. Could this attitude be regarded as an African cultural *repertoire* that allows people to surpass or disregard boundaries, to the extent of giving up and breaking with things done and ideas held before? That this is a fruitful direction for further exploration is also proposed by Francis Nyamnjoh. Inspired by Kopytoff (1987), he views Africans as 'frontier beings' who are 'deeply uncomfortable with bounded identities and exclusionary ideas of being' and who 'contest taken-for-granted and often institutionalised and bounded ideas and practices of being, becoming, belonging, places and spaces' (Nyamnjoh 2017:349)[5]. However, anthropologists found it difficult to apprehend this

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[4]   See the critique of Engelke (2015:86-100) that the characterization of Africa as 'never secular' and 'incurably religious' is grounded in the binary of secular and religious. As he argues, the understanding of religion in the framework of this binary fails to grasp what religion is and means in Africa today.

[5]   According to Nyamnjoh, this attitude is grounded in a recognition of incompleteness, which 'opens the door for connectivity and interdependence,

attitude and instead tended to 'define and confine and to ignore the history of flexible mobility, encounters and fluidity of identities' (Nyamnjoh 2017:351), thereby contributing to simplification, whereas the true challenge is to grasp a world in permanent flux. Clearly, as Chidester also observed, on closer inspection, the frontier zone enshrines various possibilities and strategic options for engaging with others and with new things and ideas. Therefore, for scholars of religion and anthropology it is an excellent site to learn not only about the imposition of order through closure and categorization, but also about how multiplicity and the presence of others offer occasions for something new, albeit in the context of hierarchical power relations.

The importance of the notion of the frontier zone for scholarly analysis is not limited to spheres of European imperial outreach, such as Southern Africa or the West African coast, but also pertains to contemporary Europe, where especially the metropolises have become increasingly diverse. As I will argue in the next section, a scholarly attitude that is associated with studying religion and its analytic concepts *from* frontier zones – as embodied by Chidester – is greatly needed for a fresh exploration of the 'bewildering complexity' of religion in postcolonial European cities.

In-between spaces in European frontier zones

If about twenty years ago, in my own professional experience, the study of religion in Europe and other regions seemed to be worlds apart, the historical and actual entanglements of these regions have become more and more apparent, as the current so-called European refugee or migrant crisis spotlights markedly[6]. In the meantime, North-Western Europe has developed a highly

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active participation, mutual fulfillment and enrichment. It compels us as humans to broaden our perspectives, embrace the unknown and the unknowable, and to be open-ended, open-minded and flexible in our identity claims and disclaimers' (Nyamnjoh 2017:340). Nyamnjoh discusses this attitude in relation to the possibility of new forms of research collaboration – in his case between African and Japanese scholars – that generate mutual enrichment and conviviality.

[6] Since 2014, 1.8 million refugees have arrived in Europe, via various routes across the Mediterranean. A list assembled by the Dutch NGO United for Intercultural Action (UNITED), and published by the Guardian on the occasion of World

heterogeneous and diverse or plural religious environment: Unchurching occurs alongside articulations of staunch atheism, the search for new spiritualities and the return of Christianity as heritage (or even its 'hijacking' as a cradle of European identity – Marzouki, McDonnell & Roy 2016), as well as the rise of Islam, Pentecostalism, Hinduism, and (Western forms of) Buddhism in increasingly self-consciously plural societies. Europe's others, who were ideologically and conceptually distanced through colonialism and deemed to be far away, are now co-present with secular atheists, protagonists of Christian religion 'as we know it' and spiritual seekers.

Although I have not yet conducted a detailed anthropological research on religion in Europe, I often act as supervisor of bachelor, master's, and PhD theses, as well as postdoc projects on the changing religious environment and the public debates triggered by this process in the Netherlands (cf. Beekers 2014; Tamimi Arab 2017). Engaging with the work of colleagues studying the dynamics of religious diversity in European cities (e.g. Burchardt & Becci 2016; Hüwelmeier & Krause 2010) and the position of migrants and refugees from Africa therein (e.g. Butticci 2016; Knibbe 2011), I came to realize that my expertise as an Africanist studying religion from and in Africa is much more relevant than was the case some years ago for understanding the encounters and interactions in current frontier zones. Clearly, the coexistence of religious actors and organizations poses a challenge to the Western-centric concepts and theories that once were employed to arrange people and religions into hierarchized evolutionary schemes along temporal and spatial axes, and that constituted an earlier politics of ordering difference through hegemonic schemes.

It is a mistake to rely on temporalizing frameworks according to which religion is a matter of the past and is supposed to vanish, and according to which certain religions are considered backward and not befitting an ideal modern society. Mobilized in public debates, such views should be subject to scholarly analysis, instead of driving it theoretically. The point is to resist describing plural religious environments in terms of the simultaneity of the

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Heritage Day, reports 34,361 deaths (up to 5 May 2018) occurring over a period of 20 years, as migrants and refugees tried to enter Europe, with 2015 being the pinnacle of the so-called crisis (McIntyre & Rice-Oxley 2018). See the long article by journalist Daniel Trilling (2018), who deconstructs five myths that shape the public debate about refugees and migrants.

non-simultaneous – 'die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen'. Doing so would resuscitate the simplifying and temporalizing use of the categories of time and space that underpinned the study of comparative religion in colonial frontier zones. The aim is to take the, at times uneasy, co-presence and entanglement of different religious and secular groupings and its ensuing dynamics as a starting point.

In the aftermath of the rejection of secularization theory as the dominant analytical framework in the study of religion in modern societies, the question how to conceptualize and study religious plurality has become a pressing issue[7]. Analyzing plurality from a fresh perspective, demands intense conversations between scholars with expertise on religion in the Global South and on transnational migration on the one hand, and the sociology of religion in Europe on the other (as argued by Beekers 2015). There is a need for a reformed and synthesized study of society that includes sociology, anthropology, *volkskunde* (folklore studies, now called European ethnology), and religious studies. The old division of labor between sociology (as the discipline devoted to the study of modern societies in the West) and anthropology (as the discipline devoted to the study of non-Western cultures) that developed in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, has become obsolete in

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[7] The terms 'plurality' and 'diversity' have generated a great deal of scholarship and debate, and also figure in policy discourses and public debates. They are already part of attempts to come to grips with the dazzling multiplicity of religious forms and elements, and of modes of managing religious difference; in this sense, they have become part of the construction of the phenomenon to which they refer. I refrain from using pluralism as an analytical concept because of its strong normative connotations (cf. Bochinger 2013); and while I use both plurality and diversity, I have a slight preference for plurality, because diversity has been incorporated into policy more explicitly. Initially, I thought that 'pluriformity' might be a viable alternative term (also because of the attention called to the 'form' through which religion is expressed), only to realize that it is deeply embedded in Calvinist theology in the aftermath of Abraham Kuyper and has also been deployed in the racist politics of difference of the apartheid regime (Van den Hemel 2009:117-133). The fact that there is no neutral, merely descriptive term available to refer to the coexistence of multiple religious traditions and secular standpoints points to the political, social, and ethical stakes involved in this kind of research. My main concern here is to call attention to the shape and dynamics of the religious environment as a whole in terms of its relationality and entanglement.

the context of current global entanglements and millions of people on the move. Likewise, the differentiation of the study of cultures as classified under anthropology (if located far away) and opposed to European ethnology (at home), makes little sense in the face of the current complexity of cultural and religious diversity in Europe. Added to this, with the dismissal of the secularization theory as the master narrative for an increasingly disenchanted modern society, academic expertise about religion – in past and present, across the globe – is indispensable for grasping the largely unexpected resilience and even revival of religious matters. Developing new socio-cultural approaches to (religious) plurality in European societies involves major epistemological challenges. At stake is the production of knowledge beyond well-trodden universalistic (and yet *de facto* Western-centric) claims[8]. These claims are not only politically contested, but also subject to radical epistemological critique and calls to 'decolonize' academic knowledge production. Needed is a socio-cultural approach to plurality that is able to think about differences without putting them into simplifying categorizations or essentializing them as unbridgeable alterities (cf. Jullien 2017).

Scholars working on contemporary religion from an anthropological perspective are well equipped to enter deep into the religious worlds of their interlocutors and discern more or less fundamental differences between Western and non-Western, secularist, and religious ways of being in the world[9]. However, even if one wishes to conduct a study of one particular religious group (as anthropologists are inclined to and certainly should continue to do), it is necessary to situate it in a wider social and political

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[8] This Western-centric universalism involves a totalizing aspiration that contains differences by putting them into hegemonic orders. A true universalism – for instance with regard to a shared humanity – cannot simply be imposed but is to be aspired to and negotiated through encounters across differences (cf. Jullien 2017:19-34; Mbembe 2014:25).

[9] Nowadays, a number of them advocate a radical ontological orientation, which goes much further than the phenomenological 'bracketing' employed in religious studies. Deep insight into the particularity of religious traditions and non-religious stances is certainly necessary but should not stand by itself. The challenge to develop concepts and methods for the study of the coexistence of people embedded in various religious traditions or varieties of secularist worldviews, cannot be met by approaching religions – let alone cultures and societies – as separate ontological universes.

environment. This requires moving beyond the edges and margins of religious (and secularist) groups, where they rub against each other in the limbo of an in-between space or *Zwischenraum*.

Simmel has suggested in his seminal essay on space and spatial orders of society (Simmel [1908] 2016; cf. also Flickinger 2005), that *Zwischenräume* are the locations where different actors relate to each other. As the form through which experiences of distance and closeness, fixity and movement *vis-à-vis* others occur, space is the condition for social relations to exist. Simmel ([1908] 2016:688) aptly describes space as an activity of the soul (rather than being given). An in-between space – an interstice or third space (cf. Bhabha 1993) – is not fixed, but in flux and subject to continuous transformation. The difficulty of describing encounters in an in-between space without presupposing or reiterating identities as given, should not prevent one from trying to think about encounters as at least potentially open (for recent original work on Africa, cf. Janson 2016; Spies & Seesemann 2016).

Intriguingly, the French philosopher and sinologist, François Jullien, proposes to conceive the 'in-between' not in terms of *difference* (which he associates with discourses that invest in fixing identities), but in terms of *distance*, which requires an awareness of some kind of gap and an activity of bridging between people, terms, or positions. The 'in-between' does not exist by itself but is a site where something happens. Taking it as the nodal point, it is possible 'to disrupt the logic of belonging that was established through [the emphasis on] difference and to liquefy identities. Thus, it is necessary to leave behind the thinking of being (of ontology) in order to think of the in-between' (Jullien 2017:42; author's translation).

The notion of the in-between space provides a promising entry point for an analysis of religious plurality beyond well-trodden lines. I understand Chidester's notion of the frontier zone as an in-between space in this sense. It is a site where differences and distances are produced, negotiated and affirmed in the framework of identity politics (from above and below); our analysis will explore their implementation and operation. The point is to grasp how identities become real, without taking them for granted and vesting them with immortality. Working on the dynamics of frontier zones in European metropolises along these lines enables us to clear 'postcolonial, postimperial, postapartheid spaces' where, to invoke Chidester's vision once again, 'something new in the study of religion might happen' (Chidester 1996:266, see above).

Birgit Meyer

Towards a 'frontier future': Three programmatic points

In closing, I will highlight three programmatic points that may offer directions for working towards a 'frontier future' and that can be made fruitful for the study of religion and beyond.

First, thinking about European cities – my own ideas are grounded in my experiences in Amsterdam and Berlin – helps sharpen our awareness of the extent to which the current religious plurality reverberates earlier, colonial categorizations generated in 19th-century frontier zones in Africa and other sites of European empires. People from these areas migrated and still migrate to Europe, especially to larger cities that are becoming more and more diverse. While diversity pertains to European societies at large, cities – and especially metropolises – are dense nodes of coexistence across manifold religious and other differences. Migrants often appear religious in ways many Europeans find difficult to accept, and that challenge established modes of accommodating religion through state policies, epitomized by the proverbial separation of church and state (which, of course, does not exist in pure form). While there is much commotion about the presence of Muslims and the material manifestations of Islam – mosques, halal food, Islamic dress – in public urban spaces across Europe, the religious practices and ideas of Christians from Africa, Latin America, and Asia receive much less public attention. If, from a mainstream Western secular perspective, Christianity has become a religion of the past, it is still somehow familiar and evokes fewer anxieties than Islam, which many take to be incompatible with a modern, secular order. At the same time, old colonial and racist stereotypes are frequently mobilized in claiming the superiority of modern Westerners to migrants and refugees from Africa. The latter are regarded as 'backward', not only because they are so staunchly Christian, but also for failing to adopt modern, emancipatory views on, for instance, same-sex relations and gender diversity and for falling prey to superstitions such as a belief in witchcraft[10]. Repercussions of older qualifications abound through which Europeans dealt with their 'others' who were long far away and are now nearby. Tracing current perceptions of religious 'others' back to colonial frontier zones and spotting how the scholarly vocabulary generated from there, as mobilized in current views on religious plurality, is important if we are to grasp everyday contemporary echoes of colonial categories and standpoints. A critical study

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[10]   These issues are addressed in the research project led by Kim Knibbe (2018).

of religion has much to offer in unpacking the transregional entanglements that shape contemporary, urban religious environments. This unpacking is what I understand a postcolonial approach to religion in Europe to be about.

Second, Chidester's analysis of the frontier zone as a zone of conflict in which a new order is imposed and negotiated, is well taken. The current European frontier zones are, though, not a reverse case in which the tables are turned. While populist propaganda may qualify Muslims as intruders who intend to Islamize Europe, and Africans as prone to racial mixing with white women, the truth is that the newcomers and people with a 'migration background' include large groups of formally colonized or otherwise deprivileged people, who are expected to practice their religiosity within the framework of an existing secular order. Asad (2003) has pointed out that in modern societies religion is positioned in a secular formation that underpins policies of regulating religious diversity (Mahmood 2015). This entails a modern, liberal understanding of religion, which is strongly tied to belief and supposed to exist beside, and to accept the authority of, the domains of politics, law, and science. This understanding of religion – modelled on Christianity – forms the normative base for policies dealing with religious newcomers, and shapes debates about 'good' and 'bad' religion in the public domain. While religious plurality as such is not new in Europe (Kippenberg, Rüpke & Von Stuckrad 2009), there is now a high degree of friction and a perceived difficulty to accommodate religion and manage conflicts within a secular framework, as numerous conflicts around religious dress, food, sounds, and buildings occur. In other words, the established accommodation of religion conditioned by the 'secular truce' (Achterberg, Houtman, Aupers, De Koster, Mascini & Van der Waal 2009) through which it is tolerated and even to a degree protected by the modern state, is challenged and prompts new policies and regulations (cf. Becci, Burchardt & Giorda 2016)[11]. As new frontier zones, large European cities in particular have to accommodate new manifestations of religion at a time when Christianity is in serious decline and, ironically, missionaries from the colonial mission field now seek to re-convert Europeans to Christianity (cf. Adogame 2013).

There are many ways to investigate conflicts and tensions that arise in such new frontier zones. In line with Chidester, I regard a focus on materiality

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[11] Regulations regarding religion are of course also employed by states outside of Europe (cf. Burchardt 2018 in reference to South Africa).

as a productive entry point (cf. Strijdom 2014 for a discussion of our respective views). In 2016, I was able to set up a collaborative research project titled *Religious matters in an entangled world* (Meyer 2016). When approaching religion from a material perspective, the starting point is *religious matters*. These include both the tangible manifestations of religious forms – including images, objects, buildings, dress, food, and so on – in public spaces and matters of concern about this presence in public debate and policy. The regional *foci* are Africa, Europe, and their entangled history. The researchers involved in this project seek to contribute to developing fresh understandings of the dynamics of coexistence across religious and other differences in African and European societies (with special emphasis on urban areas). Like Chidester, we use 'religion' and 'religious' as problematic and yet unavoidable terms, and thus as terms that offer 'occasions for critical and creative reflection on problems of interpretation, explanation, and analysis in the humanities and social sciences' (Chidester 2018a:42).

Third, doing research on religion in contemporary frontier zones in the spirit of Chidester means having a good sense of humor and finding paradox and irony. This dimension is strongly emphasized in his latest book *Religion: Material dynamics* (Chidester 2018b). Religion is usually taken as a serious mentality: '[T]he academic study of religion has inherited a humourless legacy' (Chidester 2018b:68) and yet, the frontier zone is a prime site for laughter, as Chidester shows in many examples, for instance the Tswana response to the preaching of the missionary Robert Moffat that their ancestral spirits were actually demons, which they found completely ridiculous (Chidester 2018b:59). Laughter, according to Chidester (2018b:5), occurs in the slipstream of incongruity, which 'appears in the gaps, but can also register in mixtures and mergers, in syncretisms and hybridities, in which disparate factors converge without synthesis'[12]. He even proposes to appreciate laughter as a form of comparative religion undertaken from an African perspective. The sense of incongruity between an intended order and an actual disorder can go in many directions, yielding puzzlement and surprise. We certainly also find it in current frontier zones in Europe, even though the commotions about religious and other differences are often grim and deadly serious.

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[12] 'As both an unstable category and a destabilizing category, incongruity challenges all of the categories in the academic study of religion' (Chidester 2018b:5).

I think that Chidester's attitude towards the incongruities in frontier zones that provoke laughter and ridicule, links up very well with the surrealist critique of European colonization and imperialism and of Eurocentric conceptual schemes for the representation of differences. Focusing on weird – 'primitive', heterogeneous, extraordinary – things and employing montage, collage, and fragmentation, the early 20th-century surrealists were in close contact with some (especially French) anthropologists, with Marcel Mauss as a central figure (Albers 2018:249). James Clifford (1981) points to the value and importance of surrealism as an alternative approach in the socio-cultural sciences. Especially the reversal of the gaze, through which the familiar becomes strange and the 'modern' and the 'primitive' are made to mirror each other, entails a sense of incongruity and alienation for beholders. By shifting the gaze, surrealists were able 'to represent culture as something that can and must be subverted, parodied and transgressed' (Albers 2018:248; author's translation). Recently, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (2018 – Berlin) featured the exhibition *Neolithic childhood: Art in a false present, ca. 1930*, which revisits the first decades of the 20th century, when the modern colonial order was established, tracing not only its impositions of ordering mechanisms, but also potentials for its reversal and possibilities for thinking differently. Such work at the interface of the arts and the socio-cultural sciences gives fresh impetus for the study of plurality and coexistence in current European frontier zones. And obviously, with his inclination towards the surreal, Chidester is a major figure in this project.

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