As we move into a new century, religion is omnipresent in the United States: Churches, synagogues, and temples are more active as centers of worship and social activity in this country than in most other nations, more so than in most social activity in this country than in most other modern countries; small groups focusing on faith and spiritual well-being are flourishing, in religious congregations as well as in businesses and corporations, hospitals, and medical schools; spiritual concerns are frequently voiced on television programs, and bookstores and coffee shops across the country are places of religious discussion; on college and university campuses there are growing numbers of religious communities, many of them representing world religions once thought of as foreign to the American experience, that compete for student loyalty; political candidates invoke the name of God and speak freely about faith in relation to the nation and its moral fabric. Seemingly no aspect of contemporary American life—popular culture, organizations, politics, aspect of contemporary American life—popular culture, organizations, politics, religion—is cut off from religion. With religious and spiritual discourse finding easy expression in so many niches of social experience, the study of religion becomes an exciting and lively adventure.

Hardly a marginal enterprise limited to a handful of sociologists, historians, and others, the study of religion is increasingly a part of a liberal arts education. Religion in one aspect or another reaches far and wide within college preparation for most careers today involves—or should involve—exposure to religious belief systems and values. Whether preparing to become an international journalist, a teacher in an urban school, a manager of a business, an attorney, or a physician, all increasingly call for some knowledge about and understanding of religion. To understand the local community in which one lives and perhaps even the strange people living next door—not to mention global terrorism or warfare—religion is likely an important factor. Globalization is remaking the world, bringing what is distant to us and complicating what once seemed very familiar.
But why the sociology of religion? Why this particular approach to the study of religion? First, it must be understood that such an approach is demystifying and debunking. A product of the Enlightenment, the sociological perspective jettisons theology and faith commitments and emphasizes instead the socially constructed character of religious life and institutions. It focuses on the human expression of religion in its many dimensions and seeks to understand through the most objective analysis possible, its patterned character in everyday life. As seen through such a lens, religion is preeminently a social and cultural phenomenon—another social institution to be studied, much as one would examine the family, politics, or law. Second, because religion is so deeply and intricately involved in social life, to fathom its reach we must be open to its far reach, to its obvious and not-so-obvious ways of bearing upon people's lives. Even people who are adamantly insistent that they are not religious often decide they are not so sure once they have grasped more fully religion's many forms and functions in society. And the fact that religion is a dynamic and changing phenomenon means that at any given point in time we have only a snapshot, which cautions against too presumptuous or closed a view of what religion is, or even of our relation to it.

A prominent sociologist some years ago, C. Wright Mills, spoke of the importance of a "sociological imagination." To his way of thinking, a "sociological imagination" involves scrutiny of one's own biography as the intersection of personal and social life. It is an exercise, he insisted, that should yield new and rich insights into personal and social identity. Indeed, thinking about our own lives as an intersection of personal and religious influences opens up the possibility of understanding our deepest identities and of the connections between how we understand ourselves and social influences. At a very rudimentary level, a sociological imagination disciplines one to ask basic questions about religion, questions that potentially can shake a person out of a taken-for-granted snapshot, which cautions against too presumptuous or closed a view of what religion is, or even of our relation to it.

The elephant the blind man asks:

What is it?
Where did it come from?
What does it do?

Simple questions, yet basic ones for formulating an overall perspective. Sociology of religion addresses questions, framed differently, but similar in that they seek a broad and encompassing grasp of the religious phenomenon.

With the first of these, much discussion and debate continues. What is religion? Or broader still, what is the sacred? These are words that pop up all the time, yet are deceptively complex in the myriad of meanings attached to them. The history of the sociology of religion is itself bound up with disputes over definitions. In debates over the impact of modernity on religion and the sacred commentators are forced into taking a position about their meaning. Likewise, in discussion about religious pluralism and its consequences in American life, the terms cannot be avoided. Sometimes religion is equated with the sacred; other times religion is thought of as a social institution, or a particular social and cultural system, and the sacred is defined more broadly as whatever inspires awe, respect, fear, trust, or the search for meaning, to name some of the qualities associated with it. But one thing for sure is that modernity and pluralism as we experience them in the early twenty-first century force us to think carefully about all our definitions. And in this respect the discussion about religion will not go away. Religion is so encompassing a reality we cannot arrive at a final definition, as if our grasp of it could be settled once and for all, but rather as social conditions and circumstances change inevitably we are pressed to think anew and to critically review and reformulate the basic terms. A course on the sociology of religion encourages reflection on such matters, and in so doing examination of one's own, and often limited, views.

If sociology as an intellectual enterprise is demystifying and debunking, then much the same holds with a critical look at religion. Placing brackets around our own views, however, is not easy. Presumably the blind man encountering the elephant had some prior notion of an elephant, and thus having rubbed his hands over the trunk and tail decided it was an elephant. Somewhat similarly, we all have some notion of religion as we understand it in our own lives and society, and hence we recognize its conventional forms. Yet if religion is dynamic, always evolving, and multifaceted, its forms may not always be so easily recognized. Often we become so accustomed to looking to the places where religion is familiar that we overlook the hidden or emergent forms; and just as people's lives are lived forward but interpreted from the past, notions about religion become easily bound up with what we know of it out of the past. This in itself is a fundamental sociological insight: Time is a dimension in which to locate our own definitions of reality, and to explore how those definitions change.

Also, the very fact we live in a rapidly changing world forces us to be sensitive to ways in which religion itself may be changing, and to understand that our own mappings of the world around us are themselves culturally conditioned. Here sociology can yield important insights. When we explore ways in which the term religion has been defined, or those aspects of the phenomenon held up as most prominent, we begin to appreciate just how complex and many-sided religion can be. Typically, definitions focus either on substance or function, that is, religion is known either by means of its intrinsic quality (for example, religion is belief in gods or God) or through its consequences (for example, religion serves to integrate society). The two are not of course mutually exclusive nor is one approach superior to the other. As the introduction to Part I (Classical Sociological Definitions of Religion) suggests, perhaps we should look upon definitions of religion as "tools in a tool kit." Just as in practical life we use a particular tool to fix things, depending upon the problem that needs fixing, in social analysis we rely upon a range of conceptual approaches to grasp religion or the sacred. Given the mythological, symbolic, ritual, social, psychological, and behavioral properties of religion, obviously no single definition captures its fullness.

The second question—pertaining to the sources of religion—drew much attention among philosophers and sociologists in an earlier era. Many differing
types of answers were put forth presupposing primordial human concerns and emotions, but beginning with the great French sociologist Emile Durkheim in the early years of the twentieth century, social thinking on religion shifted in emphasis rather markedly from causes to sources. Focusing on the latter, attention increasingly was given to the functions of religion, and particularly, as Durkheim saw it, to religious symbols and ritual as a basis for societal integration. For empirically minded sociologists, what was important was how symbol, ritual, and belief was linked to group life itself. Durkheim's societal-wide perspective was countered by Marxian analysis of power and social class and the relation of religion to economic inequalities. But out of this broader discussion emerged the sociological study of religion as we know it today with its sharply defined emphasis on religion as a group phenomenon. This does not, of course, obfuscate the psychological importance of religion, but points to the various levels of analysis on which the subject matter may be addressed.

Given the complexity of religion in its social and cultural context, questions two and three—sources and consequences—complement one another. This is apparent in this reader by the many sections entitled simply as “Religion and . . .” where depending on the perspective advanced, religion is viewed as either an “independent” or “dependent” variable. To take an example, “Gender and Religion” as a topic covers a broad span of issues ranging from religious heritage as legitimating gender-role inequalities (and also inspiring challenges to old role definitions) to the influence of changing gender roles in society on religious belief and outlook. From the time of the classical sociologists to our own day, this Janus-faced quality of religion has inspired careful analysis of its role in society. And for this very reason, the sociological approach offers the serious student opportunity to delve deeply into a phenomenon like religion and to look at it from a variety of standpoints. In which case, one discovers that religious reality is far more multi-layered, engaged, and interactive in its social environment than is commonly taken for granted. “Sociological imagination” is at its best, in fact, when an individual can carry on a conversation within him- or herself, moving with some ease across differing perspectives—in one instance, looking at religion as an influence upon society, and in the next, to religion as legitimating some existing social or economic arrangement. Such insights become truly existential when those shifts in perspective self-consciously intersect with a person's own life and biography. This particular reader encourages just such conversation and reflection.

Sociology of religion cannot address matters of personal faith. In this respect, it is neither “for” nor “against” religion. What it can do, however, is to help a person become not just better educated, but also more self-reflexive. Such a person will be more conscious of his or her decision making and better understand those decisions in social context. Moreover, rich sociological imagination carries with it the possibility of personal adventure—the excitement of self-discovery and of greater understanding of society and its processes. And should this happen for you using this text, it will have served the purposes of the editors very well.