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# Preface

INVESTIGATING SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON religion can require significant research. There are classic articles to read, authors whose inclusion is a must, and alternate perspectives that can be hard to dig up if you're not already aware of them. The books that have existed up until now offer either a summary of these perspectives or simply a collection of articles with little connecting information at all. *Religion in Today's World* addresses the need for a comprehensive book that both includes key works and also places those works in the broader context of the sociology of religion. Designed as a hybrid between a textbook and a course reader, this text contains everything that an instructor or an interested general reader might need to explore the social dimensions of religion.

## Social Scientific Perspectives on Religion

The social sciences, and the interdisciplinary field of religious studies, approach religion as a social phenomenon to be studied. There is no question here of the veracity of any religion; rather, the fact that someone believes certain things to be true, or holds certain practices to be effective, is in itself of interest. I often teach students to approach the study of religion using the tools suggested by early phenomenologist (and ancestor of the social sciences) Gerardus van der Leeuw (1938): *epoché* and *verstehen*. The first term, *epoché*, refers to a suspension of judgment. Through this lens, one approaches the religion to be studied not with questions of truth or falsehood, good or evil, but with questions about what truth is for the practitioners of that particular religion. This is where *verstehen*, or empathetic understanding, comes in. The social scientist of religion endeavors to comprehend the religion under study as best she can, striving as much as possible to mentally get inside the world of the religious practitioners in order to better understand the religion itself.

This is a very different approach from those that study religion in order to identify which is correct, or in order to fulfill a spiritual quest, or in order to better understand the "enemy." Neither, however, are social scientific approaches to religion actively sympathetic to the religion under study. This is not to say that social scientists are firmly objective; I am persuaded that all of us enter our work with our own personal biases and perspectives that are impossible to eradicate. Thus, our efforts at *epoché* and *verstehen* are

always only partially successful. We can, though, be aware of our biases and our differing perspectives, and through a clear analysis of them and a balancing with others' (equally but differently skewed) perspectives, we can come to an approximation of objectivity about a religious phenomenon.

This book represents largely the perspectives of the sociology of religion, with some voices from the anthropology of religion and from religious studies itself. Readers will also notice a focus on qualitative readings; I have chosen primarily qualitative and theoretical reading selections because I believe both to be more accessible to a range of readers than is most quantitative work. The readings included here encompass the work of early scholars and contemporary ones; the work of well-known scholars and more obscure ones; and studies of both mainstream and marginal topics in the study of religion.

## Using this Book

The goal of *Religion in Today's World* is to provide a comprehensive introduction to sociological perspectives, and social scientific perspectives more broadly, on the phenomenon we call religion. The book is divided into five sections, covering different areas in the study of religion and society. The first questions what religion actually is, what its past has been, and what its future will be. The second section examines interactions between religion, state, and nation. The third takes up a topic that threads through much of the social science of religion without being clearly articulated: religion and social power. The fourth section considers the intersections of religion and social movements, in terms of both religion's role in social movements and religion itself as a social movement – here, the study of new religious movements comes into play. Finally, the fifth section considers some of the results of globalization and the resulting localization movement: immigration, transnationalism, and violence. Each section contains an introductory essay that covers key sociological concepts and findings relevant to the section's topic; what follow are several reading selections that either demonstrate the concepts covered or push them further. Every essay also includes an "extended application" that demonstrates how the concepts covered in the chapter can be applied to recent or contemporary issues.

This text can be used in many ways. A general reader unfamiliar with the social scientific study of religion may want to begin simply by reading the introductory essays in order, and then returning to the selected readings. An instructor may wish to have students read through the entire textbook in order, or to rearrange by theme or chronology of articles. Those instructors with extensive experience in the sociology of religion may wish to assign the introductory essays as reviews or complements to class lectures, while less experienced instructors may find the essays helpful for introducing the key topics in each new section. Finally, the course reader aspect of the book's design allows both instructors and general readers to select the readings they find most helpful, to rearrange the order of the readings, or to read the book cover to cover.

Two aspects of this text will be especially useful in classroom settings, although again they may also be of interest to the general reader. The first is the glossary, found in the

back of the book, which contains concise definitions of key terms introduced in the introductory essays. Instructors may wish to draw from this for vocabulary tests, or to refer students to it as a study aid. Second, each introductory essay concludes with exercises that can be completed for fun by a general reader, or as homework or in-class assignments for students.

Sociological perspectives on religion can open new windows onto this complex, socially and politically critical phenomenon. Discovering new perspectives on religion can be both challenging and delightful, and I wish you much enjoyment as you work through this book.