Although some scholars in the sociology of religion adopt interpretivist or pragmatist viewpoints of the sort associated with symbolic interactionism (Mead 1934, Blumer 1969) and social constructionism (Schutz 1962, 1964, Berger and Luckmann 1966), while others turn to Émile Durkheim (1912) as a central source of reference, the notion that religion represents a humanly contrived realm of endeavor has a much more enduring philosophic base. Indeed, although Durkheim generally is envisioned in more distinctly positivist or structuralist terms, his work on religion displays an array of pragmatist emphases that contrast notably with the structural tendencies associated with his earlier, best-known works (1883, 1895, 1897).

Pragmatist claims pertaining to religion may in fact, however, be traced to various classical Greek scholars including Protagoras (ca. 490–420 BCE), Herodotus (ca. 485–425 BCE), Democritus (ca. 460–357 BCE), Plato (ca. 420–348 BCE), Aristotle (384–322 BCE), and Epicurus ca. 341–270 BCE). Still, among the classical scholars, it is the Roman, Marcus Tullius Cicero (ca. 106–43 BCE) who provides the most sustained analysis of religion as a humanly accomplished essence. Cicero may be best known as a rhetorician, but he is also a highly competent philosopher and religious studies scholar. Cicero's most consequential texts in religious studies are On the Nature of the Gods, On Ends, On Fate, On Divination, and Tusculan Disputations. Notably, Cicero subjects religion to a dialectic analysis of the sort Plato generally encourages but which Plato largely avoided as a theologian. Dio Chrysostom's (ca. 40–120) statement on religion is by no means as extensive or rigorous as are Cicero's materials. Still, as the following discussion will show, Dio Chrysostom provides a rather explicit and instructive consideration of what presently may be referenced as a pragmatist or constructionist emphasis.
A Greek educated author from the broader Roman era, Dio Chrysostom is often considered part of “the Second Sophistic” movement (ca. 60–230 CE). Beyond his general roles as a Greek philosopher and rhetorician who was also involved in the affairs of state, we know little of Dio Chrysostom’s background. Given the various political, religious and intellectual disjunctures as well as the natural ravages of time over the intervening centuries, our access to preserved texts from this era is notably limited. Still, Dio was not alone in addressing religion in more pronounced pragmatist terms. Thus, somewhat related considerations of religion may be found in the texts of Plutarch of Chaerónia (ca. 46–125), Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215), Lucian of Samosata (ca. 120–200), and Sextus Empiricus (ca. 160–210). Like Plato, Clement of Alexandria exempts Christian theology from a more extensive constructionist analysis; however those who read both Clement and Dio Chrysostom will recognize similarities when discussing people’s conceptions of the gods. Whereas Lucian is best known as a satirist, several of his texts address the pragmatist, constructionist, or relativist paradigms with respect to religion. Following in the tradition of the Pyrrhonists who claimed that nothing is self-evident, Sextus Empiricus advanced a totally skepticizing viewpoint, refusing to make judgments on anything. Minimally, although this chapter concentrates on one of Dio Chrysostom’s texts, it should not be assumed that “the constructionist standpoint” developed herein is especially unique to him.

In order to establish a contemporary pragmatist or constructionist frame for the chapter, I will briefly outline the premises and methodological emphases of symbolic interaction. Representing a sociological extension of the American pragmatist philosophic tradition, symbolic interactionism developed through a synthesis of this tradition and ethnographic research at the University of Chicago with Herbert Blumer (1969) as the principal architect. These eleven premises or assumptions may establish the conceptual parameters for the present consideration of religion as a humanly engaged process.

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1 The present statement on the eleven premises or assumptions of the symbolic interaction, building most centrally on Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969), very much resonate with and are informed by Schutz (1962, 1964) and Berger and Luckmann (1966).

2 These have been adapted from Prus 2007a: 8–9.