The following article was written in 1984, when I had the pleasure of hosting Cristiano Grottanelli as a James J. Hill Distinguished Visiting Professor at the University of Minnesota. Since both of us were quite dissatisfied with the academic study of religion at that time, we took the opportunity to reflect on the history of our field, hoping to identify what had inhibited its development. The results of our inquiry were presented first as a lecture and then as a publication for Minnesota’s Center for Humanistic Studies, which hosted the talk and sponsored Grottanelli’s visit. Given this venue, the article was never widely distributed and when the Center succumbed to budget cuts in 1986, it became unavailable. Although there are points where we would modify our presentation were we writing de novo and although we recognize that things have changed some (but hardly enough!), Professor Grottanelli and I both think that the general argument remains sound and we are pleased that the editors of MTSR believe our old text sufficiently worthy of discussion to warrant its republication.

1. Introduction

Although the academic study of religion (as a general category and in its specific historic forms) is a relatively recent phenomenon, the variety of motivations which have prompted scholars to undertake this study is considerable, and the methods and data which have been employed by students of religion are also manifold. Yet for all of this, there are relatively few scholarly works on the topic which have shown themselves to be of any lasting significance, and fewer still such works that have appeared in the last half century. As Clifford Geertz lamented some years ago: “[W]e are living off the conceptual capital of [our] ancestors, adding very little, save a certain empirical

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enrichment, to it... There is Durkheim, Weber, Freud, or Malinowski, and in any particular work the approach of one or two of these transcendent figures is followed, with but a few marginal corrections" (Geertz 1973: 87). One could discuss the precise list of names—we could add Marx and Engels, while deleting Freud—but the situation has not changed appreciably since Geertz wrote, although his own name and that of Claude Lévi-Strauss might now be added to the list.

Such a state of affairs raises numerous questions, to be sure. Why is it that theoreticians working prior to 1925 or thereabouts were able to meet with such success and continue to exert such influence? Why is it that prior to this time the study of religion was a central concern for scholars of such varied interests? And why is it that so little significant work has been done since their pioneer researches? One particularly striking datum must be noted at the outset: of those individuals whose contributions have had enduring influence, not one was or would have considered himself a specialized student of religion, nor were any of them—in principle—particularly interested in “religion” per se. Rather, they tended to be people of varied professional callings—sociologists, anthropologists, political activists, and the like—who came to study the nature of society, and in so doing were forced to confront the powerful role of religion in shaping, maintaining, and also at times in changing the nature, structure, and functioning of those societies with which they were concerned. As a result, for all their differences—and they are many—classic theoreticians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whose writings continue to inform the great majority of current studies, explored religion not as a denatured and isolated Ding an sich, but as one part, albeit an extremely important part, of a broader sociopolitical and historic field.

2. Mythic ancestors

One can recognize this, for instance, in Marx’s treatment of religion in his writings of the 1840s, the earliest works which we will consider.\(^2\) Here, moving beyond Feuerbach’s purely philosophical dis-

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\(^2\) The most important of Marx’s writings on religion have been conveniently collected in a volume entitled *Marx and Engels on Religion* (1964). See in particular the “Theses on Feuerbach” (69-72; written in 1845), and the “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” (41-58; written in 1844).