



Toward A Sociology of Irreligion

Colin Campbell

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The curious reader who chances on this volume may well wonder why a book that has been out of print for nearly forty years is being republished; and what is more, re-published in its original form, without any attempt at revision. Part of the answer is to be found in the introductory commentary by Lois in its potential interest as an “historical artifact” and there would also have been considerable obstacles to overcome if this work really was to be brought up-to-date. In lieu of any revision, that the original text is accompanied by a contemporary commentary to bridge the intervening years. I can see all too clearly the unconscious omissions, logical difficulties and weaknesses of argument that evaded me at the time and, I note, some of the book’s reviewers. I should perhaps stress that the reason I did not continue to pursue an interest in the study of irreligion after 1972 was not because my colleagues in the profession failed to share my enthusiasm for this field of study. Rather it was due to a growing belief on my part – one I still hold – that phenomena such as religion and irreligion cannot be properly understood except in their larger socio-cultural context, a context that is necessarily both diachronic and synchronic in nature. In other words, that such phenomena need to be examined in terms of both their historical context (something I had already attempted) and their current socio-cultural systemic context (something I had not). So it was that, in the years after the publication of this work, I turned more and more to the study of the larger Western cultural system of which these phenomena were components. . This change of focus did not mean that I lost all interest in the sociology of irreligion, for my youthful enthusiasm for the topic meant that the subject still held a fascination for me. It was merely that it had ceased to be the focus of my research. Consequently, whatever the reason is for the current and long-overdue upsurge of academic interest in atheism, secularity and non-religion, I am naturally delighted that it has happened, and especially grateful to Lois Lee and Stephen Bullivant for their part in enabling this process through their far-sighted initiative in launching the Non-Religion and Secularity Research Network (NSRN).

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