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Toward a Sociology of Irreligion

COLIN CAMPBELL

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Introduction

No tradition for the sociological study of irreligion as yet exists and this book has been written in the hope that it will help to stimulate the development of just such a tradition. Lacking a foundation on which to build, however, meant that writing such a book presented a very real problem. How was the subject-matter to be approached? Which of the many respected perspectives and intellectual currents within contemporary sociology would be appropriate to an examination of irreligion? As it transpired, these questions were academic in both senses of that word, for the mode of treatment has been largely dictated by the nature of the information available. Some of the topics which it was originally intended to include have had to be omitted for lack of adequate data, whilst others have been discussed in a restricted fashion for the same reason. In the event, the ensuing discussion relies upon historical material much more than was originally anticipated, although in no sense has it been the intention to substitute a historical for a sociological treatment of the phenomenon of irreligion.

The book is divided by chapters into five main parts, each of which attempts to make a different contribution to the development of a sociology of irreligion. In Chapter 1 there is a brief outline of the setting against which the emergent study of irreligion exists, both with respect to the historical background of the rise of irreligion in contemporary Western society and the intellectual background of the neglect of this phenomenon by sociology. Then, in Chapter 2, there follows an analytic exploration of the nature and varieties of irreligion. The emphasis here is on morphology, with special attention given to the difficulties surrounding the delineation of the boundaries of irreligion. Chapter 3 constitutes a marked change of perspective in order to introduce the concrete phenomenon of irreligion through a brief account of the major irreligious social movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is followed in Chapter 4 by an attempt to explore

some of the major points of articulation between irreligion and other spheres of social life. This is approached directly in the case of morality and politics and then indirectly in the consequent discussion of the sources and functions of irreligion. Finally, Chapter 5 investigates some of the implications which the sociological study of irreligion has for the functionalist tradition within the sociology of religion.

The aim of this book is to explore the possibilities for the development of the sociological study of irreligion. This, it was felt, could be best achieved by allowing the discussion of the material to generate its own perspectives, rather than by employing particular developed sociological viewpoints. It seems, in retrospect, that this has enabled the subsequent exploration to make critical observations on the sociology of religion and that, in general, the spirit which animates the following discussion is, in keeping with the subject-matter itself, that of the sociological sceptic and iconoclast.