The rationale of this paper is to show the value of Charles Taylor’s analysis for a comparison between the religiously vibrant scene in Latin America and the uniquely secular context of Western Europe. However, I have reservations about the idea of ‘postsecularity’. It is highly debatable whether contemporary Europe is ‘postsecular’, even though the classical secularization thesis is in some disarray. If there is anything qualitatively new about the position of religion in the West that might be caught by the term ‘postsecularity’, it lies in the processes of global mobility that result in the presence in all global cities of religious sub-populations who have not been formed by the cultural history that made the West ‘secular’ in Charles Taylor’s sense. The rise of an exclusively secular perspective as the ‘default position’ in the West has preoccupied Taylor for at least the last twenty years and formed the major theme of his two most influential books, Sources of the Self and A Secular Age (Taylor 1989; 2007). For that reason I am doubtful whether ‘postsecular’ is the most useful label for Taylor’s work. But, the term has acquired currency, and Taylor is one of the contemporary philosophers directly challenging the dominance of secularist assumptions in social philosophy. I begin, therefore, with a consideration of the paradoxes underlying the emergence of the term ‘postsecular’.

A cynical sociologist of religion might suggest the increasing use of the term ‘postsecular’ indicates that Europeans who had taken for granted the irrelevance of religion in modern society have been forced to revise their views by the appearance of Muslims in the public sphere of Europe and North America, and of Islamist terrorism as a feature of global politics. As a consequence, some of them have belatedly recognized that religion is a powerful force in America, not quite as moribund in Europe as used to be assumed, and growing like wildfire in the developing world.

But there is more to it than this. The association of secularization with the advance of modernity and science has been one of the most pervasive assumptions in sociology, a central plank of the theoretical
models and methodological prescriptions of the founding fathers, and seemingly validated by the decline of European Christianity and the rise of the influential secular perspective in the West that is anasonized in Charles Taylor’s work. All the social sciences, as offshoots of the European Enlightenment, had secular assumptions built in from the first. Even the sociology of religion, which might be expected to harbour some empathy for the religious perspective, has traditionally insisted upon ‘methodological atheism’, which in practice it is as likely to support reductionist assumptions and definitions (religion as a secondary manifestation of something more ‘real’, such as ‘deprivation’, the fear of death, or an assumed need for comfort, or certainty, or economic advantage) as to guarantee the predicated scientific ‘objectivity’ (Beckford 2003; Davie 2007; 2008). In 1965 David Martin wrote an article arguing that the secularization thesis was as much secularist ideology as science, and frequently involved self-fulfilling prophecy masquerading as disinterested theory and selective observation presented as objectivity (David Martin 1965; 1966). The sociological community paid little attention. But in 2006 José Casanova suggested that the dominance of a secularist knowledge regime among social scientists and public commentators was the main reason public expressions of religion were regarded as a problem (Casanova 2006). In Public Religions in the Modern World Casanova had shown that, despite what the secularization theory claimed about religion having become ‘privatized’, religion had never in fact been absent from the public sphere either in Europe or America, irrespective of whether there was a formal separation of state and Church (Casanova 1994). Casanova was widely acclaimed as having transformed the field. Are the empirical changes in the situation of religion sufficient to explain why Casanova’s argument about secularist bias can now be taken seriously as evidence of a ‘postsecular turn’, while David Martin’s, forty years earlier, was not?

1. *Religion since the Mid-Twentieth Century: Empirical Developments*

From the 1960s onwards, Latin America saw an enormous growth of popular Protestantism, mainly Pentecostalism, especially among the mobile poor who were flocking to the burgeoning megacities. These cities quickly became honeycombed with store-front churches with