Debates about “secularization” have been productively revisited in recent years (Martin 1991, Casanova 1994, 2006, Dobbelaere 1999, 2002, Smith 2003, Blancarte, 2008, Gorski and Altınordu, 2008). Most of the founders of sociology believed in one or another version of secularization theory, though they differed considerably in whether they took the phenomenon to be linear and inevitable or contingent, what they took “religion” and thus “secularization” to mean, and what they took to be its main causes (e.g., Weber 1958, Comte 1998). As sociology developed in the middle of the twentieth century, most scholars continued believing in secularization (Parsons 1963, Berger 1967, O’Dea 1967), though again the phenomenon was conceptualized and explained by scholars in very different terms (the gamut running from simplified versions of “modernization theory” to complex theories of differentiation to Berger’s synthetic approach in The Sacred Canopy).

By the late twentieth century, a “new paradigm” drawing on rational choice theories arose (Warner 1993), rejecting secularization and arguing that increasing religious pluralism (a typical component of “modernization” as conceptualized by most) increased religiosity (Stark 1999, Finke and Stark 2003). Partially in response to this paradigm, but also to the failings of some earlier theories of secularization, scholars began to draw more clearly either (a) different conceptualizations of...
secularization (Casanova 1994, Chaves 1994, 1997) or (b) different levels at which secularization can possibly take place (Doebbelnaere 1999, 2002). Both of these developments led in a similar direction: the analytical separation of possibly related processes and temporary, strategic agnosticism about the relationships between those processes. A conclusion reached by many has been that a renewed focus on “macro-level” (Doebbelnaere) secularization or “institutional differentiation” is needed. At the same time, recent scholars (Gorski 2003, Smith 2003) have emphasized the need to treat secularization in historical terms, meaning, in part, treating it as a contingent process produced by and partially subject to the (structurally-constrained) choices and strategies of actual, empirically-discernible, social actors. What this suggests is a comparative-historical sociology of institutional differentiation, with a focus on the differentiation of the state from religious organizations.¹ As pioneering works by Martin (1978) and Casanova (1994) would suggest, this means both (a) attempting to discern general causes of institutional differentiation and (b) trying to locate and then explain distinctive paths that secularization can take in different societies and times.

Despite some discussion alongside other cases by Martin (1978, 1990) and Casanova (1994), little comparative work has been done on secularization processes in Latin America, particularly over the longue durée. Sociologists of religion and scholars in cognate fields who are interested in Latin America have focused on an array of questions, such as the causes and consequences of religious pluralism and the rise of Protestantism (and especially Pentecostalism) in the region (for example, see Martin 1990, Stoll 1990, Gill 1998, 2008, Smilde 2007) or on linkages between religion and economic development and/or democracy and democratization (for example, Freston 2008).² This work is very important, and it must be noted that much of it is relevant to a consideration of the question of secularization in Latin America. However, there is a need for the sociology of religion in Latin America to take a longer-range historical view and to analyze basic underlying

¹ It is of little difference whether or not this process is characterized as “secularization” or simply as the transformation of religion’s place in society (Lambert 1999, Gorski and Altinordu 2008).
² There has been a huge outpouring of writing by social scientists and historians on religion and Latin America in recent years. The vast majority of this work cannot be considered here. For an important work by an historian bearing on questions of secularization, see Voekel (2002).