PART II

RELIGION BETWEEN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC, STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY
CHRISTIAN RELIGION IN THE WEST: PRIVATIZATION OR PUBLIC REVITALIZATION?

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Introduction

“After nearly three centuries of utterly failed prophesies and misrepresentations of both present and past, it seems time to carry the secularization doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories, and there to whisper ‘requiescat in pace’” (Stark 1999: 269). Stark’s words, published just before the turn of the century, may count on much approval among sociologists of religion today. Secularization theory has been discredited because of its inability to account for religious change in the modern world (e.g., Berger, 1999; Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Houtman and Mascini, 2002) and because of its sheer broadness and lack of specificity, as emphasized by Hadden (1987: 587), for instance, when he noted that it is a “hotch-potch of loosely employed ideas rather than a systematic theory”.

Secularization theory’s two principal subtheses, the ‘decline-of-religion thesis’ and the ‘privatization thesis’ (Casanova, 1994), have both become increasingly contested and recent research even suggests that these two aspects of secularization may develop in a remarkably uneven way. That idea is put forward by Achterberg et al. (2009), who point out that the decline of Christian religion in the West spawns its public revitalization rather than its further privatization. This paper elaborates on this by assessing the empirical merits of two objections that suggest that these recent findings may after all not contradict the established notion that religious decline and religious privatization occur in tandem.

Privatization or Public Revitalization?

Public Revitalization of Christian Religion in the West?

According to the decline-of-religion thesis, one of the principal subtheses of secularization theory, religion continues to lose ground in modern societies. This thesis is critiqued nowadays by those who maintain that