RETHINKING SECULARIZATION:
A GLOBAL COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

José Casanova

Over a decade ago, I suggested that in order to speak meaningfully of ‘secularization’ we needed to distinguish three different connotations:

a) Secularization, as **decline of religious beliefs and practices** in modern societies, often postulated as a human universal developmental process. This is the most recent but by now the most widespread usage of the term in contemporary academic debates on secularization, although it remains still unregistered in most dictionaries of most European languages.

b) Secularization, as **privatization of religion**, often understood both as a general modern historical trend and as a normative condition, indeed as a precondition for modern liberal democratic politics. My book, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, (1994) put into question the empirical as well as the normative validity of the privatization thesis.

c) Secularization, as **differentiation of the secular spheres** (state, economy, science), usually understood as ‘emancipation,’ from religious institutions and norms. This is the core component of the classic theories of secularization, which is related to the original etymological-historical meaning of the term within medieval Christendom. As indicated by every dictionary of every Western European language, it refers to the transfer of persons, things, meanings, etc., from ecclesiastical or religious to civil or lay use, possession or control (Casanova, 1994).

Maintaining this analytical distinction, I argued, should allow to examine and to test the validity of each of the three propositions independently of each other and thus to refocus the often fruitless secularization

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debate into comparative historical analysis that could account for different patterns of secularization, in all three meanings of the term, across societies and civilizations. Yet, the debate between the European and American sociologists of religion remains unabated. For the European defenders of the traditional theory, the secularization of Western European societies appears as an empirically irrefutable *fait accompli* (Bruce, 2002). But Europeans tend to switch back and forth between the traditional meaning of secularization and the more recent meaning that points to the progressive, and since the 60’s drastic and assumedly irreversible, decline of religious beliefs and practices among the European population. European sociologists tend to view the two meanings of the term as intrinsically related because they view the two realities, the decline in the societal power and significance of religious institutions and the decline of religious beliefs and practices among individuals, as structurally related components of general processes of modernization.

American sociologists of religion tend to view things differently and practically restrict the use of the term secularization to its narrower more recent meaning of decline of religious beliefs and practices among individuals. It is not so much that they question the secularization of society, but simply that they take it for granted as an unremarkable fact. The United States, they assume, was already born as a modern secular society. Yet they see no evidence of a progressive decline in the religious beliefs and practices of the American people. If anything, the historical evidence points in the opposite direction of progressive *churching* of the American population since independence (Butler, 1990). Consequently many American sociologists of religion tend to discard the theory of secularization, or at least its postulate of the progressive decline of religious beliefs and practices, as a European myth, once they are able to show that in the United States none of the usual ‘indicators’ of secularization, such as church attendance, frequency of prayer, belief in God, etc., evince any long-term declining trend (Stark, 1990; Stark and Bainbridge, 1995).

The new American paradigm has turned the European model of secularization on its head (Warner, 1993). In the extreme ‘supply-side’ version of the rational choice theory of religious markets, American sociologists use the American evidence to postulate a general structural relationship between disestablishment or state deregulation, open free competitive and pluralistic religious markets, and high levels of indi-