



**UNIVERSITÀ
DI TRENTO**

**Dipartimento di
Sociologia e Ricerca Sociale**

Ph.D in Sociology and Social Research Seminar

Prof. David Voas – University College London

Dimensions of disagreement over religious decline

Thursday, April 16th, 2026 - 02.00 pm

Discussant: Prof. Ferruccio Biolcati Rinaldi – Università degli Studi di Milano

Chair: Prof. Ruud Luijkx – Tilburg University

Abstract:

There is a striking lack of agreement about the nature and causes of declining religious identity, practice and belief. At least four dimensions of disagreement are apparent.

First, some scholars assert that decline is limited to 'church' religion, which is being replaced by other forms of religious practice or spirituality. Others accept the reality of decline, while denying that it is a consequence of modernisation.

Secondly, explanations for religious decline often appeal to local cultural conditions and historical contingency. Proponents contest the idea that there are common causes operating across different societies, emphasising particularity and denying generality.

Thirdly, among scholars who accept the idea that modernisation creates problems for religion, there is a tension between simple and complex explanations. Some have tried to identify one key factor as the driver of the process, while others take a multi-causal view.

Fourthly, there is disagreement about the speed of the process. The standard position was that secularisation develops over centuries. More recently, a number of authors have argued that religious decline has been sudden, at least in some countries.

I will contend that a secular transition is really taking place, following a common pattern around the world, and that multiple features of modernisation erode religious identity, practice and belief, typically over a long period.

Meeting room - Ground floor Dipartimento SRS,
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