Is the United States a Counterexample to the Secularization Thesis?

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Abstract: Virtually every discussion of secularization asserts that high levels of religiosity in the United States make it a decisive counterexample to the claim that modern societies are prone to secularization. Focusing on trends rather than levels, Voas and his coauthor maintain that, for two straightforward empirical reasons, the U.S. should no longer be considered a counterexample. First, it recently has become clear that American religiosity has been declining for decades. Second, this decline has been produced by the generational patterns underlying religious decline elsewhere in the West: each successive cohort is less religious than the preceding one. The United States is not an exception. These findings change the theoretical import of the U.S. for debates about secularization.

Professor David Voas is the Director of Research and Professor of Population Studies at the Institute for Social and Economic Research University of Essex, Essex, UK.

Voas is one of the most prominent quantitatively-based European sociologists of religion and brings a European perspective to the study of American religion and questions of secularization.