

2-12-2017

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Recommended Citation

Romero, A. 2017. Plekon looks at the evolution of religious beliefs. *College Talk* (10):1-1. 12 February 2017. (URL: <http://www.aromerojr.net/Publications/937.Plekon.pdf>)

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Plekon looks at the evolution of religious beliefs

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

Abraham Lincoln once said, “When I do good, I feel good. When I do bad, I feel bad. That’s my religion.” He sounds like a precursor of today’s millennials, who, although they do not feel attracted to any organized religion, still have a space for spirituality and righteousness in their hearts.

Someone who looks at religion from many different viewpoints is Dr. Michael Plekon, a professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York.

“Over the years, I’ve not only taught sociology of religion but also headed the program in Religion and Culture. A number of us who are on the Weissman faculty teach comparative religion, the history of various religious traditions, and the connections between politics and religion,” says Plekon.

A native of Yonkers, New York, he started studying the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard because he conducted an analysis and critique of society using both faith and a very sharp political and economic criticism of the class system—who was being left behind, the working class, the poor farmers, and such.

Plekon’s interest in religion began early on when he chose to pursue a bachelor’s in Sociology and Philosophy from the Catholic University in Washington D.C. He would later obtain a master’s and a doctorate in Sociology and Religion from Rutgers University in New Jersey.

The titles of the books that Plekon has authored are very attractive and the books themselves deal with issues that intrigue both believers and non-believers: *The Church Has Left the Building*, *Uncommon Prayer*, *Saints as They Really Are*, *American Voices*, *Lives and Paths to Holiness* are some of them.

Plekon makes sure that we do not confuse religion studies with brainwashing. “Religious studies is what the word says: you’re studying religion as part



Dr. Plekon at work.

of culture, part of civilization, part of society, part of the economy. You’re not indoctrinating,” he explains.

“Probably the most commonly taught course is comparative religious traditions. We don’t try to turn people into Muslims or Buddhists or Christians or Jews or Hindus, but we try to show them what those traditions offer, how they form and shape the people who live in them.”

He himself has journeyed through different persuasions. “I started out in the Eastern Orthodox Church. My parents moved away from it. They went to a Catholic Church. As a matter of fact, I had a Catholic upbringing for many years. I was even a Carmelite Friar for eight years. I served as a Lutheran pastor until 1996, when I was transferred over into the Orthodox Church. I’ve been in all three of the great Christian traditions,” says Plekon.

He has witnessed the evolution of attitudes toward religion among the latest generations. “I look at ‘religious nones.’ I think maybe our students here and many other millennials fall into this category. It doesn’t mean that they aren’t spiritual; it doesn’t mean that they don’t have ethical questions; it doesn’t mean that they don’t have a reverence for life and for justice. It does mean that they’re not much interested in belonging to or joining the religious congregations or denominations of their parents,” explains Plekon.

He also understands why so many millennials have moved away from organized religion. “We probably don’t need the organizational and institutional forms that it’s taken in the past, and unfortunately we tend to associate religion only with those. If you think of the early days of any religious

tradition, it was without all of that institutional elaboration, and so I would say we do need what the core of it is, which is the love and regard for the neighbor, for the Earth, for justice, for goodness, for truth. The outside forms, the tent that it’s in, the temple that it’s in, the cathedral or the church that it’s in, maybe that leaves the building.”

At this point Plekon goes back to Kierkegaard. “He lived in the early nineteenth century in a country where there was a state church. In his book *Works of Love*, you see that for him, there’s always a triangle. There’s God, yes, but there’s also the neighbor whom I’m called to love everywhere and in every place, and then last of all me, and I think in that way he’s echoing the best of not only the Christian tradition but the Jewish tradition.”

He also looks at how the Catholic Church is evolving. “I think Francis is going to go down as one of the most controversial but also one of the most restorative and invigorating religious leaders that the Catholic Church has ever had,” says Plekon about the Pope. “He did go on the record a couple of years ago in saying that abortion is serious but that it is not the only issue we have to talk about, and I like it since I was in my other life a priest. When he says to priests and bishops, ‘you ought to smell like the rest of your flock,’ he thinks of them as sheep herders, as shepherds.”

And Plekon always likes to go back to the original Christian writers in his search for the best of religious beliefs. “Almost every way that they speak about God has to do not so much with highly theoretical abstract ideas or concepts as with very, very concrete situations in daily life. I mean, some of them use parables just as Jesus does in the gospels, and the parables are often striking because they show the humanity that’s always at work and that never can be forgotten.”

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Photo by Yulia Rock.