

Secularization Revisited: Review of Plekon, *Community As Church, Church As Community*

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Michael Plekon, *Community As Church, Church As Community*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021.

Father Michael Plekon works in two capacities: as an Orthodox priest and as a scholar in the sociology of religion. This combination helps him approach from both pastoral and sociological perspectives a topic intensely debated primarily in the US but also Europe: the shrinking number of churchgoers in the mainline churches. On a more speculative level, this debate is framed by what sociology of religion describes as secularization.

Speaking roughly, there are two ways of looking at secularization, one considered more European and the other more American. According to the former, secularization is the global human history's *telos*, with religion being inevitably replaced by secular worldviews. A few decades ago, many European thinkers contemplated secularization as a linear process, with religion following the trajectory of a falling airplane. Now, many proponents of secularization see this process as nonlinear, but still leading to religion hitting the ground. Having realized that religion would not disappear anytime soon, they patched the ideology of secularism with what has been called post-secularism. According to this modification of secularism theory, religion might be resurgent for some time, but will recede again sooner or later.

According to an alternative outlook on secularization, held primarily by American sociologists, religion is not disappearing and never will. It is rather

in a state of perpetual change. So is its place in and relationship to the public sphere. Merely because one form of this relationship disappears does not mean that religion is permanently banished from the public square. It means that a new form of relationship substitutes, or is going to substitute, for the old one. In other words, the ever-changing forms of religion are in a dynamic relationship with the evolving forms of human social existence.

A scholar who represented both approaches is the late Peter Berger (1929–2017). Originally born in Austria, he brought to the US a continental take on secularization. In a *New York Times* article published in 1968 and tellingly entitled “A Bleak Outlook is Seen for Religion,” he wrote: “By the twenty-first century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture.”¹ This prophecy was never fulfilled. Just before the turn of the century, when religion was supposed to have disappeared, Berger edited a book that also bore an indicative title: *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. In this publication, he admitted that he was wrong in predicting the evaporation of religion. When I met him at his Boston apartment a few months before he passed away, he tirelessly repeated that religion is alive and as cool as ever. At this later stage of his academic career, Berger adopted and

¹ Peter Berger, “A Bleak Outlook is Seen for Religion,” *New York Times*, February 25, 1968: 3.

spearheaded an American approach to the phenomenon of secularization.

Plekon, a disciple of Berger, implements this approach in his study of American communities. On the one hand, he acknowledges changes that sometimes appear as reductions in numbers, failures, and decline. On the other hand, he remains optimistic and believes that new forms of communal life may and indeed do emerge in place of old ones. He puts these complex sociological processes in the traditional Christian terms of death and resurrection. He demonstrates how religion in America dies and resurrects across many communities and denominations. This part of his book resembles an encyclopedia of communal life in the United States. The many cases of communities emerging, disappearing, and then emerging again demonstrate that similar patterns of shifting and realignment occur in all confessions. This is important observation suggests that both secularization and desecularization do not depend much on the particular beliefs a church holds. In other words, sociological processes do not correlate with theological tenets. Moreover, communal failures, even more than common tenets, seem to demonstrate how close different churches are to each other. Father Michael's book clearly corroborates this idea.

Plekon connects the resurrection of religion in America with communities, not administrative structures. This is another important insight. In my own ecclesiological work, I differentiate between the nature and the structures of the Church. The former is invariable and infallible, while the latter change and often fail. I believe communities constitute an intrinsic part of the Church's nature—I call them the Church's hypostases—while administrative structures, such as dioceses, patriarchates, and so forth, are accidents of the Church's nature. I am happy to find myself on the same page with Father Michael, who taxonomizes a dizzying and ever-changing variety of communal life. As the book's title suggests, he identifies the Church with its communities. For this reason, he invests his hope for the Church's resurrection in its communities and not its hierarchies. This vision is contrary to what many in the Orthodox churches believe. In Russia, for example, the religious revival that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union has ended up multiplying and strengthening episcopal structures that subsume communities. This looks like a formula for failure. Father Michael's book also argues that it is wrong. If the Church wants to sustain its revival, it should invest not in its bishops but its communities. ✪

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