

Regional

Springer studies links between religions

In today's technology-dominated world, it is sometimes hard to imagine how people thought and behaved a couple of thousand years ago. It is oftentimes even harder

to appreciate how what we can learn from the distant past can benefit us in the 21st century.

Yet some scholars think that the study of that past is extremely relevant. One of them is Carl Springer.

Springer was born in San Diego, Calif. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in classics, German and theology from Northwestern College in Wisconsin. He received his master's and doctoral degrees from the University of Wisconsin in Madison, where he studied Greek, Latin, and Hebrew.

He said that he knew since he was young that he had an interest in the ancient Greeks and Romans. Today he is a professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

"There are not a lot of classicists around any more," said Springer. "But those who are feel attracted to understanding the roots of Western culture."

One area he has been researching is the relationship between paganism — the belief in many gods — and Christianity. Since Christianity developed within Greek and Roman cultures that were essentially pagan,

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Campus Talk

he and other researchers have been asking what are the similarities between both. "That is the question that has been absorbing me for my professional career," explained Springer.

One characteristic of all Greek and Roman pagans was their strong sense of idolatry toward particular gods or goddesses. Some argue that some Christians' belief not only in God, but also in saints, angels, and the like, is itself a form of paganism, an argument that is still being used today in disputes between Protestants against Catholics.

"It is an important truth that over the history of Christianity, Christians co-opted pagan winter festivities such as Dec. 25 and made it Christmas. The fact of the matter is that nobody really knows when Christ was born," said Springer.

Paganism also has strong ties to mythology, another research area for Springer. In fact, most of the Roman gods were the same as the Greek gods — just with different names.

"Christianity rises out of the Roman world, which was highly civilized. Therefore it is not surprising to find some similitudes between the two," said Springer. "It is interesting to see that at the beginning of the 4th century,



Professor Carl Springer at Museo Nazionale Romano. Photo courtesy of Avery Springer.

to be a Christian in the Roman Empire was illegal and by the end of that century, it was illegal not to be one."

In fact Christianity was not the only reli-

gion at that time. "There were many religions at the time of the birth of Christianity. The Romans borrowed a lot from many of those religions," explained Springer.

The Romans were essentially pagans, Springer said. "They did not have many myths but deities. Even manure was a deity because they connected manure to fertility.

They were more attuned to nature worship," he added.

Despite the passage of time and the preponderance of monotheistic religions — those that believe in a single god — such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, we still have many traditions derived from paganism that we cherish, such as carnival, which predates Christianity.

"Carnivale means farewell of meat to begin the period of Lent," Springer said. "Over half of the Roman calendar was devoted to festivities. They did not have Saturdays or Sundays, which originated with the Judeo-Christian traditions," added Springer.

But, of course, many celebrations are observed worldwide for which there seems to be no religious reason or cultural barrier. Springer said that he believes that "celebrating is part of human need, part of what makes us humans."

No wonder we see today the revival of certain pagan celebrations, such as the solstices — marking the shortest and the longest days of the year.

Springer's current research centers on the relations between Native Americans and the religions of the first Europeans to come to America.

In one of his most recent articles he pointed out the fact that the Protestants that colonized North America did not have an evangelizing agenda.

This lack of interest in conversion meant that they did not bother to absorb any of the pagan traditions from Native Americans that would make Christianity more palatable to the natives.

That was not the case for Catholics in Latin America. "They even taught Latin to Native American students under Spanish influence," Springer said.

One of the courses that Springer teaches at SIUE is Latin. And what does he expect students to gain from studying a language that is mostly considered as "dead"?

"I hope that what my students of Latin learn is their command of their own language," Springer said, "since about 60 percent of English comes from Latin, particularly in science and medicine."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.