

Jaroslav Pelikan and the Road to Orthodoxy

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For most of his life, Jaroslav Pelikan was a Lutheran who practiced his faith quietly and devotedly. Although he had been ordained to the ministry as a young man and preached and presided at the celebration of the Eucharist, as his scholarly work deepened and his engagement with the university grew, the churchly side of his vocation was less evident to the public.

But those who knew Pelikan well knew that at heart he was a seminary professor most at home in a theological community. He saw himself as *doctor ecclesiae*, a teacher of the church, and taught as a man of faith. And by "teaching" he meant the church's cardinal doctrines, that God is one, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and that Christ is one person, fully God and fully man—those teachings that were solemnly declared in the ancient councils and are confessed in the ecumenical creeds. Pelikan's historical study had convinced him that the most faithful bearer of the apostolic faith was the great tradition of thought and practice as expounded in the writings of the orthodox church fathers, the medieval thinkers, and the magisterial reformers.

In the spring of 1994, after I had made the decision to be received into full communion with the Roman Catholic Church, I was in New Haven for a conference celebrating Pelikan's seventieth birthday. My reception into the Roman Catholic Church was to take place in mid-summer on the day of St. Bridget of Sweden, July 23.

Pelikan had been my teacher and friend for thirty-five years, and I wanted him to know before rumors began to spread. I had first met Pelikan in the fall of 1959 when I was a student at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis thinking about graduate study. Pelikan had come to town to give a lecture, and I had the privilege of driving him to the airport afterward. As a result of that conversation, I decided to apply to the University of Chicago. In the fall of 1960, I matriculated at the Divinity School. At Chicago, under Pelikan's tutelage, I read Tertullian and Leo the Great and Augustine among the Latin fathers, and Athanasius and Cyril among the Greek fathers, and I heard Pelikan lecture on the history of Christian thought. He led me to the topic which would become my dissertation and first book, Cyril of Alexandria's commentaries on the Gospels as a basis for

understanding his theology. When I was a student at the University of Chicago, Pelikan proposed that we name the Lutheran campus ministry "St. Gregory of Nyssa Lutheran Church." The name was accepted, and during my years as a graduate student we would see each other weekly at the Eucharist at St. Gregory of Nyssa Church.

After he went to Yale in 1962 and I finished my Ph.D., we kept in touch. Over the years, our friendship was nurtured by a deep love of the church's classic theological tradition, particularly the church fathers and medieval thinkers. When I arrived in New Haven to celebrate his seventieth birthday, I had some trepidation wondering how he would respond to my decision to be received into full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. During an afternoon break in the conference, I said I had something to tell him, and we walked about the Yale campus for an hour or so. When I finally came to the point of the talk and told him of my decision, he responded without hesitation: "Well, Robert, were I to do something similar, I would be received into the Orthodox Church."

That was all he said, but in the conversation that followed it seemed he had been thinking about his relation to the Orthodox Church for some time. That of course did not surprise me, because there was a definite trajectory in his scholarship that led him to the early church, particularly the Eastern fathers. This was not self-evident for someone raised in the Lutheran tradition. Pelikan began his scholarly career as a Reformation scholar. His dissertation was on Luther and the *Confessio Bohemica* of 1535.

Pelikan's first and most ambitious scholarly project was the translation of the writings of Martin Luther into English. Pelikan was not the sole editor of the series. He shared the responsibility with Helmut Lehmann, who taught at Mt. Airy, the Lutheran Seminary. But Pelikan had a significant influence on the shape of the edition. Previously the only Luther available in English was a six-volume collection of translations made in the years between 1915 and 1932. It was a useful set of volumes, but limited because the translators had focused on his polemical, catechetical, and pastoral writings. There was little from his exegetical writings. The American Edition devoted more than half of the volumes to Luther's commentaries—a major intellectual and scholarly contribution.

The many volumes of Luther's exegetical writings helped scholars and theologians see Luther within the long tradition of biblical commentary going back to the early church. Along with the French Jesuits Jean Daniélou and Henri DeLubac, and the German Lutheran Gerhard Ebeling, Pelikan was one of the first to recognize the importance of the history of

exegesis for the understanding of the history of theology. And to demonstrate that exegesis did make a difference in how one interprets the theological tradition, Pelikan published a monograph as part of the series entitled *Luther the Expositor*.¹

In this book, Pelikan had this wry comment on the way historians had approached the history of Christian thought:

Entire histories have been written—histories of a whole section of the church, of an era in church history or of a major theological problem—which do not seriously consider the possibility that at least one of the decisive elements in the thought and action of a Christian man or group may have been the way they interpreted the Bible. And this in the face of the fact that these men and groups frequently made the claim they were speaking and acting as expounders of the Sacred Scriptures. Historians have sought to assess the influence of everything from the theologian's vanity to the theologian's viscera upon the formulation of theological doctrines, meanwhile regarding as naïve and uninformed the suggestion that the Bible may be a source of these doctrines.²

The study focused on Luther's exegesis of biblical texts relating to the Eucharist (e.g., "This is my body," "For the forgiveness of sins," and "Do this in remembrance of me").

So there was no question that as a scholar and theologian Pelikan was solidly rooted in the Lutheran tradition, in particular the Reformation and the thought of Martin Luther. Yet if one looks over his published books after the publication of *Luther the Expositor* and the completion of the American Edition, his scholarly—and I suspect spiritual—interests were more focused on the early church and the larger catholic tradition.

In the same year that he published *Luther the Expositor*, Pelikan also published *The Riddle of Roman Catholicism*.³ This was a sympathetic, though not uncritical, presentation of Roman Catholicism before Vatican Council II, before the decades of ecumenical conversation between Catholics and various other communions, before the many years of Lutheran/Catholic dialogue, a time when few Lutherans had any firsthand experience of Catholicism. The book was a publishing success and helped non-Catholics overcome some of the prejudices that had developed over the centuries.

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor: Introduction to the Reformer's Exegetical Writings* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959).

² Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor*, 6–7.

³ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Riddle of Roman Catholicism* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1959).

During the next several decades, Pelikan published a number of books dealing with the church fathers. For example, *The Shape of Death* deals with life, death, and immortality in the early fathers.⁴ He did a study of the iconoclastic controversy entitled *Imago Dei: The Byzantine Apologia for Icons*.⁵ His Gifford lectures dealt with the understanding of creation in the Greek fathers. He edited a little volume of the preaching of John Chrysostom on the Gospel of Matthew.⁶ Another book of his, *The Melody of Theology*, dealt with the Greek Christian liturgical poet Romanos Melodos.⁷

But his magnum opus was *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*.⁸ For an understanding of Jaroslav Pelikan, it is of utmost importance to know that in this five-volume work he devoted an entire volume to Eastern Christianity, entitled *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)*. From the first sentence of his introduction, entitled "ex oriente lux," it is clear that he wished to rehabilitate Eastern Christianity from its many detractors. For example, he cites the historian of dogma Adolf von Harnack, who said that in the seventh century, "the history of dogma in the Greek church came to an end [so that] any revival of that history is difficult to imagine," and Edward Gibbon, who wrote that Eastern Christians "held in their lifeless hands the riches of the fathers, without inheriting the spirit which had created and improved that sacred patrimony."⁹

Although he stood in the tradition of *Dogmengeschichte* going back to Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf von Harnack, Pelikan wished to offer a wholly different understanding of the development of Christian doctrine. Harnack had seen the history of Christian thought as a gradual "hellenizing" of the gospel proclaimed during the apostolic age. As the primitive Christian faith became encrusted in Greek philosophical ideas, the essence of

⁴ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Shape of Death: Life, Death, and Immortality in the Early Church Fathers* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1961).

⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Imago Dei: The Byzantine Apologia for Icons* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

⁶ John Chrysostom, *The Preaching of Chrysostom: Homilies on the Sermon on the Mount*, edited with an introduction by Jaroslav Pelikan (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967).

⁷ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Melody of Theology: A Philosophical Dictionary* (Cambridge, Mass.: University Press, 1988).

⁸ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971-1989).

⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 1.

Christianity was obscured and corrupted. Harnack was tone-deaf to Eastern Christian writers, not only Clement and Origen, but also Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and Cyril of Alexandria. Through his research, Pelikan had come to the conclusion that patristic and Byzantine thought was a faithful interpretation of the Scriptures and of apostolic tradition. Pelikan's *Christian Tradition* showed that patristic and medieval thinkers had deepened and clarified what had been received from the apostles. When I published *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*,¹⁰ Pelikan wrote me to say that the sentence he liked best in the book was this: "The time has come to bid a fond farewell to the idea of Adolf von Harnack . . . whose thinking has influenced the interpretation of early Christian thought for more than a century."¹¹

It is evident then that as a historical theologian who had made his life project a history of Christian doctrine Jaroslav Pelikan gave much thought to the continuity of Christian life and thought over the centuries. A theological as distinct from a strictly historical approach to the Christian past will ask whether the theological tradition has faithfully handed on the apostolic faith. And at some point one is likely to wonder how the tradition to which one belongs relates to the great tradition. In 1991 Pelikan published a book on "historical theology" with the subtitle *Continuity and Change in Christian Doctrine*.¹² The more deeply he read the classical Christian thinkers, the more he was inclined to identify with them. At first these questions may have been historical and theological, but over time they became ecclesial. Pelikan's gradual move toward Orthodoxy came about in part through his historical and theological study and writing. And it is perhaps not beside the point, in light of our topic, to note that Pelikan wrote this sentence in the introduction to *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom*: "Martin Luther appealed to the example of the East as proof that one could be catholic and orthodox without being papal."¹³

The volume on Eastern Christianity was published in 1974, but there was little in his public persona that would have led one who did not know him well to suspect that Pelikan was moving closer to Eastern Orthodoxy.

¹⁰ Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003).

¹¹ Wilken, *Early Christian Thought*, xvi. Biographical note: Two of the pictures that hung on the wall of Pelikan's study were Adolf von Harnack and Georges Florovsky, the Orthodox theologian. Pelikan admired both, but his mind and heart were with Florovsky.

¹² Jaroslav Pelikan, *Historical Theology: Continuity and Change in Christian Doctrine* (New York: Corpus, 1971).

¹³ Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom*, 2.

I was told by a friend, however, that at a gathering of Lutheran clergy in New Haven in the mid-sixties in a talk on the nature of Lutheranism, Pelikan spoke of that strand of Lutheranism that led people to say that if they weren't Lutheran they would be Baptist because of the Bible. He said that was a misreading of Lutheranism and that Lutheranism was closer to Catholicism and Orthodoxy. And he added: If Lutheranism would lean in the direction of the Baptists or the Methodists, he would die in the bosom of the Orthodox Church.

To understand Pelikan's pilgrimage to Orthodoxy, it is necessary to say something about the theological and liturgical developments within The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in the 1950s. Pelikan completed his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago in 1946 and joined the faculty of Valparaiso University. After three years, he moved to Concordia Seminary, where he taught from 1949 to 1953. I arrived at the seminary in St. Louis in 1955, so I did not have him as a professor. Shortly after Pelikan arrived in St. Louis, he was joined on the faculty by Arthur Carl Piepkorn. Piepkorn (born in 1907) was sixteen years older than Pelikan (born in 1923), but this was his first academic appointment. Piepkorn, too, had studied at the University of Chicago—in semitic languages—but he had served as a pastor in a small mining town in Minnesota, and then at St. Faith Lutheran Church in Cleveland. In 1951, he was asked to join the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.¹⁴

Piepkorn believed that Lutheranism was a reform movement within Catholicism, and this meant that its deepest commitment was to the historic Catholic faith and practice. Piepkorn taught his students that the first confessions of faith in the Book of Concord are not the Augsburg Confession but the three ancient creeds, the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the *Quicumque vult* (the so-called Athanasian Creed). Piepkorn also pointed out that the Book of Concord included a Catalogue of Testimonies, which was a dossier of passages from the writings of the church fathers. Unfortunately, the Catalogue was not translated in the Tappert edition of the *Concordia*, so not all readers of the symbolical books know about them. In the critical edition of the confessional writings edited

¹⁴ My father-in-law, T.A. Weinhold, president of the Western District, was on the small electoral board, and Piepkorn was apparently elected because someone who would have voted against him did not make the meeting. I am proud to say that Pastor Weinhold voted for him.

by Hans Lietzman, the texts are written out in Greek and Latin.¹⁵ The two church fathers with the most citations are the Eastern writers Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria.

Pelikan too had a high regard for the symbolical books. For example, he translated the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* for the Tappert edition. He respected the early Lutheran scholastic theologians, who were thoroughly at home in the writings of the church fathers. Among them was John Gerhard, the author of the first *Patrologia*, an introduction to early Christian literature and thought. Gerhard also wrote a beautiful devotional book, *Sacrae Meditationes*, which is steeped in medieval spiritual literature. In sum, Pelikan and Piepkorn embraced an interpretation of Lutheranism that was sacramental and doctrinal (in the sense of the ecumenical creeds) and grounded in the writings of the church fathers.¹⁶

Besides Piepkorn, the most influential professor on the faculty of Concordia Seminary in the 1950s was Richard Caemmerer, who taught homiletics. No one could come through Concordia Seminary in those years without being deeply influenced by Caemmerer, particularly by his theology of preaching, and students sensed that Caemmerer and Piepkorn presented alternative visions of Lutheranism. Caemmerer was not oriented to the Lutheran Confessions but to Luther, not to the liturgy but to preaching. Piepkorn was no less committed to the classic Lutheran teaching on justification than Caemmerer, but he did not define Lutheranism in terms of a theological conception. To use the old language of Lutheran scholasticism, Caemmerer saw Lutheranism in terms of its material principle, Piepkorn in terms of its formal principles: liturgy, sacraments, ministry, and doctrine. For Piepkorn the most important thing that happened on Sunday was the celebration of the full eucharistic liturgy, while for Caemmerer it was a sermon that proclaimed the gospel. In the car going to the interment of Piepkorn after his funeral at Concordia Seminary, I rode with Caemmerer and his son-in-law Raymond Schulze. On the way Caemmerer quipped, "He even had to have the Sacrament at his funeral."

Pelikan and Piepkorn had a warm relationship. Philip Secker has shared with me a letter Pelikan wrote to Piepkorn on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his doctorate from the University of Chicago. Pelikan wrote: "I am beholden to you for having been a doctor of theology to me so often

¹⁵ They are included, however, in *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921).

¹⁶ When I was thinking of graduate school, I asked Piepkorn what I should study if I wanted to be a theologian. His response: the church fathers.

and grateful to God for the blessing which He bestowed upon the Church by calling you to the ministry of Word and Sacrament and to the vocation of a theological doctor." Pelikan spoke of Piepkorn as an expositor of both *lex orandi* and *lex credendi*, and in an aside he suggested that Piepkorn, in a review of Paul Tillich, use the phrase, "*sicut errat in principio, et nunc, et semper*, but I hope not *per omnia*."¹⁷

Pelikan's reasons for moving toward Orthodoxy were not only theological, but also personal. His father was a pastor in the Slovak Lutheran Church in this country and his mother was from Serbia. Though his family was Lutheran, Pelikan was raised in an Eastern European, Slavic home and learned to speak Slovak as a boy. As he grew older, he learned Russian, and all his life he had a deep, almost reverent, love of Slavic culture. At his memorial service at Yale University in the fall of 2006, he had asked that the Grand Inquisitor section from Dostoevsky's great novel *The Brothers Karamazov* be read. He also asked that the prayer to the Theotokos from Rachmaninoff's *Orthodox Vespers* be sung by the Yale Russian Chorus. He wrote a book on Cardinal Josyf Slipyj, head of the Ukrainian Church, *Confessor between East and West: A Portrait of Ukrainian Cardinal Josyf Slipyj*,¹⁸ and another entitled *Jesus, not Caesar: The Religious World View of Thomas Garrigue Masaryk and the Spiritual Foundations of Czech and Slovak Culture*.¹⁹

It was not, however, until the early nineties that rumors began to spread in ecclesiastical and academic circles. I wrote to Pelikan in the summer of 1995 to ask whether the rumors were true, and he replied that he had not taken any formal steps in relation to Pravo-Slavie. "I attend liturgies of the OCA and of the Greek archdiocese when I can, and I continue to attend at Bethesda [the Lutheran Church in New Haven]." But then he added: "As Hamlet said (he had, you will recall, been a student at Wittenberg), it 'makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of.'" A year later I met him in Rome and at dinner with him and his wife Sylvia he wanted to talk further about my being received into full communion with the Roman Catholic Church and what it meant for me.

¹⁷ "As he errs in the beginning, does now, and ever shall do, but I hope not throughout."

¹⁸ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Confessor between East and West: A Portrait of Ukrainian Cardinal Josyf Slipyj* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1989).

¹⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus, not Caesar: The Religious World View of Thomas Garrigue Masaryk and the Spiritual Foundations of Czech and Slovak Culture* (Salt Lake City: Westminster College of Salt Lake City, 1991).

So I was not surprised when he wrote me a card on March 26, 1998, the day after his chrismation in the Orthodox Church: "From our ongoing conversation you will, I know, not be surprised to learn that yesterday afternoon at St. Vladimir's I was received into full communion with the Orthodox Church. *En kurio. Jary.*"

So that is the story of Jaroslav Pelikan's pilgrimage from Lutheranism to Eastern Orthodoxy as I know and remember it. His embrace of Orthodoxy was no conversion, no turning about, no heading off in a new direction; it was a slow and gradual transformation over the course of forty years. The young Lutheran pastor and theologian and Slav in the 1950s was the same Pelikan who was received into the Orthodox Church in the 1990s. The decision grew slowly out of years of historical, theological, liturgical, and ecclesiological study and reflection.

But perhaps I should add one other factor. In the late 1980s, I was asked to serve as a Lutheran on the international commission for dialogue between the Lutheran Churches and the Orthodox Churches. At a meeting in Denmark, the topic was the seventh ecumenical council, the eighth-century council that rendered a definitive decision on the veneration of icons. The Lutherans came prepared to discuss the doctrinal decrees that had been solemnly declared at the council.

But in the very first session the Orthodox members of the dialogue said that we should discuss not only the doctrinal decrees, but also the canons. As you know, the ancient councils issued two sets of declarations, the first dealing with theological issues, the second with jurisdictional, moral, and liturgical matters. From these canons a body of ecclesiastical law arose. The Lutherans were surprised and perplexed because they had not given any thought to the canons. As it turned out this difference did not become a major issue of dispute, and most of our time was spent on the doctrinal decree on icons.

I learned from that encounter, however, a deep truth about the nature of Orthodoxy. The Orthodox thought of themselves as members of the same community that had agreed on the canons at the council. Because they belonged to that community, they felt a responsibility to what it had affirmed many centuries ago even in jurisdictional, moral, and liturgical matters. They knew of course that most of the canons were no longer applicable to the church's life today, yet they saw themselves as part of a living body whose history can be traced back through the bishops of the ancient councils to the apostles. Therefore, what had been decided centuries ago was part of their inheritance, something to be embraced as their own even though the changes had been many. Continuity with the

apostolic age was secured not only through doctrine, but also through persons.

You will recall that in the second century, when Irenaeus mounted a theological defense of apostolic Christianity against the Gnostics, he based his arguments on the interpretation of the Scriptures. He showed that the God of the Old Testament was the Father of Jesus Christ and that the Old Testament and the writings of the apostles were to be interpreted together. To support his interpretation of the Scriptures, he drew on the rule of faith, that simple summary of biblical teaching, a creed-like confession that would eventually grow into the Apostles' Creed.

But Irenaeus also appealed to the succession of bishops in the churches and named in particular several of the churches whose teaching had been handed on by those persons who stood in a tradition stretching back to the apostles. Recall that Paul wrote in Ephesians that the church is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (2:20), not on the doctrine of the apostles. In Irenaeus's view, it was not enough simply to possess the Scriptures or the "rule of faith"; he believed that there had to be a tangible sign of continuity between the church of the present and the apostolic community. This aspect of continuity, the succession of bishops, was as important to him as doctrinal continuity.

Shortly before Pelikan died, I drove to New Haven to have one last conversation with him. I spent part of the day with him and his wife Sylvia and shared a simple Lenten lunch. We talked of many things, including what he was reading: *Crime and Punishment* again, *Paradise Lost* (even though, he said, Milton was an Arian and possibly a Pelagian), and Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. He was listening to Bach, especially the B-Minor Mass.

On that last day I saw him alive, he raised the possibility of writing a book together if he had time. He wanted me as a Westerner to write on the Eastern church fathers, and he as an Easterner to write on the Western church fathers. This did not make much sense to me, because as former Lutherans we were both westerners. I said a more interesting book would be why he as a Lutheran became Orthodox and why I as a Lutheran became Roman Catholic. He agreed, but alas, he died six weeks later.

We also talked about the Orthodox Church and the mystery of the church's continuity with the apostles. In the end I think he became convinced that the Orthodox Church was apostolic and its life, liturgy, and teaching were faithful to the apostolic tradition. And it was this conviction, arrived at over time, that led him to be received into full communion.

For a churchman, scholar, and theologian like Pelikan, the reasons behind his decision to become Orthodox were theological, but also very personal, made in the depth of his soul. Though he ended his life in the Orthodox Church, his love and respect for Lutheranism remained undiminished. Jaroslav Pelikan died, I am confident, in the hope and with the prayer that one day the vision of the Lutheran reformers would be celebrated in union with the Orthodox Church.