

# Books

## The Christian Tradition. Volume I: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)

by Jaroslav Pelikan

(University of Chicago Press; xxiv + 394 pp.; \$15.00)

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Not without a certain reverence does the reviewer approach the work which, without an explicit declaration, is a candidate for the twentieth-century successor to Harnack's *Dogmengeschichte*. Neither Pelikan nor Harnack, were he present to hear the judgment, would be happy if the book were called another Harnack. I hasten to say that it is Pelikan, and that it is his intention not to do better what Harnack did well but to do what Harnack did not do at all. No one can fault Pelikan for limited vision.

The work is spacious. Not as spacious as Harnack, but it need not be. It is the first of five projected volumes, and the context of the work can be set only by enumerating the other four volumes: the spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700); the growth of medieval theology (600-1300); reformation of Church and dogma (1300-1700); Christian doctrine and modern culture (since 1700). On the generally sound principle that serious and important learned books should be reviewed only by colleagues who could or did write such a book, Pelikan's work would have an excellent chance of being read and admired by many and reviewed by no one.

Pelikan distinguishes the history of doctrine from the history of theology or of Christian thought. I do not quite like this statement, but I do not know how to reformulate

it. I mean this: Pelikan's footnotes refer the reader far more to the writings of theologians than to the utterances of the Church; and by no means the majority of these references quote the theologians as the voice of the Church rather than as the voice of theology. If it is true that doctrine is "the business of the Church," one would expect to hear more from "the Church," however one is to understand this term. It is obvious that the theologians have left us much more of their material than the ancient Church, either the teaching church or the learning church, has left us of its own material. The almost inevitable bias that is thus created leads to more of a history of theology than is intended.

Pelikan has in mind a synthesis of a vast historical movement, and a synthesis is achieved by selection and organization of materials. The synthesis will be an exposition of what the writer believes is important and of his own understanding of the interplay of persons and forces—here, of ideas. One can quarrel with the selection only if he has made his own; a competent scholar is not going to write a history of doctrine of these centuries with major omissions. With these modest reservations, I am puzzled by the light treatment which Pelikan gives of the formation of the canon of the Scriptures. Perhaps I have not under-

stood what he means by the history of doctrine; and I am ready to admit that materials for the history of the canon are so slender as to discourage the historian. It has been said that Marcion produced the first canon of the New Testament and forced the Church to respond with its own canon. I would like to hear more about the process, if there is more to be told since Harnack wrote.

The synthesis proceeds through doctrinal topics and not through the works of theologians; here Pelikan is faithful to his program, and most important writers come up under more than one topic. The study of the individual writers would be patrology. One must choose, it seems, between a point of view where one cannot see the woods for the trees and a point where one cannot see the trees for the woods. To return to a remark made above, I fear that the critical reader must have worked his way through much of the literature which Pelikan mentions and discusses; in other words, he must be nearly in a position to write his own synthesis. As an alternative to writing that book he can read Pelikan. One can fly to California from Chicago or one can choose ground travel. Either way one sees things which he does not see in traveling another way. The ordinary experience of air travelers is that when they are able to see the ground they do not know where they are. Unless Pelikan's readers have been over the ground, to carry on the figure, they may have the same experience with the doctrine of the years 100-600.

The terminus of Pelikan's air tour of the five centuries is what he calls the orthodox consensus. While doctrine and doctrinal controversy never come to repose, the period which begins with Gregory the Great seems dull compared to what went before it. Among other things, one does not have the sensation of being lost in a crowd of exciting theological talent as one has in the fourth and fifth centuries; again, doctrine cannot quite get away from the theologians. It is a good place to do what Pelikan has done, to pause and pull things

together. The consensus was formed around elements which have not been points of major controversy in the divided Christian churches since; and one who can grasp how this enduring consensus was formed has a new insight. Pelikan has it, and I believe he communicates it to his readers. One should not be surprised that the writing is dense, and I do not mean this in the sense of obscure. I, at least, make no pretense that I could read this book rapidly.

The moments in this theological period are the moments which one expects to find treated; Pelikan has not proposed some hitherto unknown person or school of thought as the key to the understanding of the period. He treats Christian appropriation of the Hebrew Bible and finally of the identity of "the new Israel"; the effort to appear respectable against the background of classical culture; the appropriation of Greek philosophy; Marcion; the Gnostics; the prophetic sects; the development of the theological canon of apostolicity; early ecclesiology and sacramental theology; Trinitarian controversies; Christological controversies; questions of grace and predestination. One would like to make some observations under each heading, but even the generous limits of this review will not permit this.

Let me say first that in those areas in which I feel something more than general competence I have no major complaints. Pelikan himself remarks that he has had to dismiss in a sentence some points about which monographs have been written, some of them by himself. This does not mean that the question of selection does not arise, as I have already indicated. The massive figure of Origen is rather lightly treated. In Pelikan's definitions this is fitting and proper; Origen had much less positive influence on the development of doctrine than other men more obscure and less orthodox. The orthodox consensus never assimilated the eccentric theology of Origen

even if it sometimes rejected him for things he never said or which his critics misunderstood. I wish that a synthetic history had found more room for instances of ignorant and prejudiced witch-hunting among some venerable figures of the age of the Fathers. It is possible to mention heresies that were created by those who prepared the formulae for condemnation. Is this pertinent to the history of doctrine? To the extent to which such misrepresentations have contributed to the development of doctrine, I suppose they are.

I hasten to point out that Pelikan is completely innocent of hero-worship. His treatment of major figures is always critical, and many of his readers are going to be surprised at some incisive criticisms of some heroes. Some readers—like me—will have their own hobbyhorses which they would like to see Pelikan ride a little harder, and I suppose I am entitled to mention a few. Irenaeus, it seems, has been vindicated as a witness of Gnostic doctrine. It perhaps deserves more extended treatment that he was a better witness of Gnostic tradition than he was of apostolic tradition. One could discourse at greater length on the share which both Athanasius and Cyril had not only in forming the faith of Nicaea and Ephesus but also in forming the heresy of monophysitism which was condemned at Chalcedon. In the work of both of these heroes, a study of how much their theology was influenced by the allegorism of Alexandria could be rewarding. The whole question of Alexandrian and Antiochene exegesis is left out, surely by a principle of methodical exclusion of which I am not convinced. I would like to see the involvement of exegesis in theology worked out because my own synthesis would come down on it heavily; but I have not done the detailed work, and I wish someone would. In the question of Christology it could be pertinent that Theodore of Mopsuestia read the New Testament and Cyril did not. Any disciple of Origen is going to have trouble with the Incarnation. Pelikan

has pointed out that the hypostatic union did not really solve the problem; it just furnished a point at which the controversy could be ended. The ending now has to be judged premature, and contemporary discussions about the consciousness of Jesus raise problems which Cyril did not even recognize, let alone attack. It is doubtful that these can be treated in a strictly Alexandrian Christology.

That figure who is most fully discussed is Augustine, and this is no surprise; the African doctor has lost none of his fascination. Peter Lombard's *Book of Sentences* was eighty per cent Augustine, and this has been the general tone of theology before and since the Master of the Sentences. Pelikan's treatment is sharply critical. He sets forth Augustine's contributions to sacramental doctrine in all their fullness, but his treatment of Augustine's predestination is thoroughly negative. He points out that Augustine's theory of Original Sin was not the understanding which was reached in the orthodox consensus. And he shows that in the Pelagian controversy Augustine overstated his case as much as Pelagius did, and thus weakened his own position. It may be noticed that Augustine was more of a dedicated rhetorician than he was a dedicated logician, and that his love of the well-turned phrase allowed him to develop in his corpus almost a complete set of self-contradictions.

Augustine's massive influence is not due to his overpowering consistency and the cohesiveness of his system. Pelikan makes Augustine's Trinitarian theology the most enduring portion of his work. Perhaps one may repeat here what was said above of Alexandrian Christology, that Augustine did not so much solve the theological problem as give controversy a good place where it could halt. Is it due to the synthesis of Augustine that Trinitarian theology has been one of the most barren areas of homiletics? Trinitarian theology has been more frequently than not an arena of theological

stunting. The believer is asked to admire the technique of the theological aerialist and not to contemplate the divine life which the saving act of God in Christ has made it possible for him to share. Speaking of my own confession, I observe that Trinitarian theology in Roman Catholic teaching and preaching is more accurately called Unitarianism modified by Subordinationism. I do not know whether one should blame Augustine for this, but Trinitarian theology has been Augustinian since the Middle Ages. It has not been strongly biblical and has had a certain ring of unreality about it.

Another theological figure, mentioned rarely or not at all in the textbooks of theology, is Justinian, treated with less fullness than I would desire but more fully than in most works I have seen which deal with the period. The theological influence of the emperors has rarely been accorded the importance it deserves. Pelikan remarks that such things belong to Church history and even political history rather than to the history of doctrine, but fortunately he does not adhere to this principle. The fact that more emperors came out orthodox than heterodox does not alter the fact that political influence on theology, if it is wholesome, is so only by accident. Politically influenced theological judgments are normally wrong, or they are right for the wrong reasons. The influence of Constantine and Justinian was on the whole pernicious, and the little they achieved which is creditable could have been achieved by ecclesiastical means without prostituting the soul of the Church. Orthodox churchmen who appealed to this means of settling theological disputes deserve to be remembered as horrible examples of how not to conduct church business and theology. They are early examples of the Christian belief that there are no immoral means to sustain something as sacred as orthodox doctrine. Pelikan lets them off too easily. One of the more enduring positions of Augustine may have been his rationalization of physical

force employed against the Donatists; Pelikan does not mention it.

This leads to another question of omission. Pelikan seems to think that ecclesiology does not belong to the history of doctrine or that there were no significant developments of ecclesiology in these five centuries. Yet Augustine's controversy with the Donatists was radically a question of the constitution of the Church. Augustine in turn did not create his response to the Donatists out of whole cloth; he spoke from a doctrinal tradition which justified his response. This tradition did not exclude certain ambiguities in the understanding of the Church; one need think only of Cyprian and the Roman Pontiffs to see that there were deep and potentially dangerous divisions in the self-consciousness of the Church. Why these divisions did not shatter the fabric of the Church is a matter of interest. Perhaps this was one of the weak points of the structure covered by imperial whitewash; if the unity which the Church preserved and in which the orthodox consensus was formed was really an ecclesiological reflection of the shaky political unity of the empire, this too would be worth study. It was not, of course, because the one church survived the collapse of the political structure. But the Church achieved an extremely imperfect unity which was open to schism, and this failure of doctrinal development is a matter of theological interest. This failure is bound to demand fuller treatment in subsequent volumes; the present divided Church shows that we have not coped with this failure of doctrinal development, and we have no statement of Christian unity which is acceptable throughout the Christian community.

I have asked many questions and hinted at some mild dissatisfactions. It should be understood that exciting books in theology are extremely rare; this is an exciting book. The daring of the venture itself is matched by the competence with which the work is executed. It succeeds, as I remarked above, in doing what Harnack did not even attempt. It may

be fanciful to deduce Harnack's essence of Christianity from the often dreary and even criminal history of theology; one wonders whether the more one learns about this history the less Christian it appears. For Pelikan the Church, like the Incarnation, has to be accepted in its historical reality. As there is no abstract non-eschatological moralistic gospel in which one may believe, so there is no ideal church which one can wait to join, rising above the existing church as not quite worthy of the intention of the founder. The historical church is the church we are stuck with, and this was the most important period in determining its identity and character.

There is a tendency among theologians, who are the only Christians who have much knowledge and interest in this period, to think of the age of the Fathers as the golden age or the heroic age of the Church and of doctrine. I have indicated my own desire that Pelikan had gone even further in the direction of demythologizing these heroes than he has gone. They have formed, as I remarked, our identity; that the existing Church has more than its share of spots and wrinkles is due to a large extent to the sins and blunders of our heroes, and not solely to the pygmies who succeeded them. The favorite superstition of theologians is ancestor worship.

Pelikan succeeds in writing an exciting book because he has mastered a vast body of erudition of which he disposes with ease. The mere accumulation of data can be fatally dull, as students of theology so well know. If the reader is willing to recognize that this is not a facile book, he will enjoy an encounter with a writer who makes the Church and its men and doctrine live. I do not know whether we can make theology, a thoroughly traditional discipline, live for ourselves and our students in our world unless we know that it has lived vigorously in the past, and that what European Christian man has turned out to be is probably more influenced by doctrine than by any other concern of the human spirit.