



Over the past 50 years, Jaroslav Pelikan has made unrivaled contributions to intellectual, cultural and religious history. His major achievements include: his authoritative work on the life and work of Martin Luther, both his own writing on Luther and his painstaking translation of Luther's writings (called "Luther's Works," a series of 22 volumes, which Pelikan edited from 1955 to 1971); his original and monumental five-volume "The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine" (1971-1989); and, his volumes that gather together the proliferation of Christian sects in our time, particularly in the Third World, "Credo: Historical and Theological Introduction to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition" (1994).

Pelikan's contributions extend even beyond these rigorous academic works. He has illuminated many aspects of both political and religious life through the visual arts, music, literature, textual interpretations and the role of the university. His popular works include "Jesus Through the Centuries" (1985), "Bach Among the Theologians" (1986), "The Idea of the University" (1992) and "Mary Through the Centuries" (1996). "Jesus Through the Centuries" presents rich reproductions of paintings and icons to examine the differing concepts of believers and unbelievers that, in the words of church historian Mark Noll, "added increasing depth to the portrait of Jesus Christ and his significance." Also illustrative of his role as an intellectual statesman, Pelikan's work on "The Bible and the Constitution" (2004) develops cross-century connections and parallels between scriptural interpretation and American constitutional law.

Born in 1923 in Akron, Ohio, Jaroslav Jan Pelikan was the first child to be born in the United States to his Serbian mother. His Slovak father had emigrated at the age of 4 to the United States, and, as an adult, returned to Slovakia as a Lutheran minister. His paternal grandfather was Bishop of the Slovak Lutheran Church in America. Young Jaroslav developed an early love of language -- learning to use a typewriter at the age of 2 1/2, mastering Slovak, Czech, German, English and, in college, Greek, Latin, Serbian, Russian and Hebrew. His intense devotion to scholarship and his rare linguistic abilities led him to edit and translate primary texts from the biblical, classical, medieval, reformation and modern periods and to build bridges between communities in Eastern and Western Europe.

In 1942 at the age of 18, Pelikan graduated summa cum laude from Concordia College in Fort Wayne, Ind., and by 1946 had received both a bachelor of divinity from the Concordia Theological Seminary in Saint Louis and a doctorate from the University of Chicago. That same year he married Sylvia Pauline Burica, and they had three children. Pelikan taught at Valparaiso University in Indiana and Concordia Theological Seminary from 1949 to 1953, and at the University of Chicago until 1962. He then began a distinguished career at Yale University and in 1972 was appointed Sterling Professor of History, the highest academic honor at Yale. From 1973 to 1978, he served as dean of the graduate school there. Pelikan, who, with his list of books and articles, would seem to have had little time for the consideration of literature and music, has also built bridges from theology to the arts. An early example of this were his essays on Dostoevsky and Bach in the book "Fools for Christ," published in 1955.

Bach appeared again in a monograph titled "Bach Among the Theologians," and another of Pelikan's favorite characters was the subject of a book titled "Faust the Theologian." A further testimony to Pelikan's stature in bridging theology and the arts was made by the cellist Yo-Yo Ma, who appeared together with Pelikan at "Musical and Theological Reflections on Bach: Yo-Yo Ma and Jaroslav Pelikan in Concert," at the Congregational Church of Stockbridge on Aug. 8, 1992. Ma said that he considered Pelikan to be the scholar that he would want to have been.

As a teacher, Pelikan had a larger-than-life reputation, relating well both to specialized academic and general audiences. His mastery of so much primary literature enabled him to synthesize and interpret lengthy periods of intellectual history. As one of his former students said: "He teaches in a way that makes the listener feel intelligent; one feels that one is fully understanding (or perhaps discovering for oneself) the intricacies of the argument." His lectures were immensely popular at Yale, and his Gifford Lectures, published in 1993 under the title of "Christianity and Classical Culture," are a cornerstone of his vast contributions.

Pelikan was president of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1994-97), founding chairman for the Council of Scholars at the Library of Congress (1980-83; 1988-94) and chairman of the board of the American Academy of Political and Social Science. He was a scholar at the Library's Kluge Center for one year, holding the Kluge Chair in Countries and Cultures of the North. At the age of 80, he accepted the position of scholarly director for the "Institutions of Democracy Project" at the Annenberg Foundation.

Pelikan's greatest contribution, "The Christian Tradition: A History and Development of Doctrine," published in five volumes between 1971 and 1989, has surpassed Adolf Harnack's "Dogmengeschichte" (4th edition in 1910) both in breadth and interpretive sensitivity; and, it has produced an incomparable historical account of the emergence and development of Christian doctrine in the English language. In that work, he demonstrated that the Christian tradition is expressed in the community's own teaching and worship rather than in what individual theologians wrote.

Pelikan single-handedly brought the Eastern or Orthodox tradition into the hitherto largely Western story of Christian tradition. The Orthodox tradition (from the Council of Chalcedon in 451 through the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and into its Greek and Russian continuations) had been largely ignored or disparaged by those who saw Byzantine Christianity as a failure of intellectual creativity. In this and other respects, Pelikan recognizes the significance of ignored and unstudied aspects of history.

One scholar notes that Pelikan "provides a supremely effective antidote to the temptation to murder our own past." As reported by U.S. News and World Report (July 26, 1989) and subsequently widely quoted, Pelikan states: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism lives in conversation with the past, while remembering where we are and when we are and that it is how we have to decide. Traditionalism supposes that nothing should ever be done for the first time, so all that is needed to solve any problem is to arrive at the supposedly unanimous testimony of this homogenized tradition."

Pelikan's motto, which comes from Goethe's "Faust" is: "What you have received as an inheritance from your fathers, you must possess again in order to make it your own."

In commemorating Pelikan's contributions with an honorary doctorate of laws at Harvard

University in 1998, the citation aptly reads: "Your vast scholarship has brought us an enriched and broadened knowledge of our culture at the same time it has made you the foremost historian of Christian thought. Your magisterial inquiry into the theological history of Christianity in its Eastern and Western, Catholic and Protestant dimensions has immeasurably enriched our understanding of the range and profundity of the Christian tradition and illuminated the cultures for which that tradition provided religious and intellectual sustenance."