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## Return to Orthodoxy

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Ambrose Mong Ih-Ren

## Return to Orthodoxy: An Examination of Jaroslav Pelikan's Embrace of the Eastern Faith

### Abstract

After a long life as a Lutheran scholar of church history, Jaroslav Pelikan was chrismated in the Orthodox Church on 25 March 1998, at the age of 75. His reason for moving towards the Orthodox Church was both personal and theological, but it was not so much a conversion as a return to where he believed he truly belonged. As a result of many years of historical study, he was finally convinced that the Orthodox Church was the most faithful custodian of the apostolic faith. This paper seeks to examine Pelikan's position on Christian doctrinal development, his sympathetic and yet critical view of Roman Catholicism, and his encounter with Hellenism, which eventually led to his reception in the Orthodox Church. Though he ended his life as an Orthodox Christian, his admiration for Luther and love for the spirit of catholicity remained. This paper concludes that Pelikan was



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indeed a true ecumenist who loved the Christian traditions he interpreted and whose life work advanced the cause of ecumenism.

## Keywords

Hellenism, Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Protestantism, Ecumenism.

## 1 Introduction

It is commonly believed that all writing is autobiographical. In this regard, the writings of Jaroslav Pelikan reveal his spiritual journey that brought him to the bosom of the Orthodox Church which he aptly described as a “the logical culmination of a development in my mind and spirit that has been going on for decades.”<sup>1</sup> A Lutheran pastor and theologian for most of his life, Pelikan ended his life as an Orthodox layman, as a result of many years of historical study when he became finally convinced that the Orthodox Church was the most faithful custodian of the apostolic faith.

In exploring Pelikan’s “homecoming” to Orthodoxy, this paper seeks to examine his understanding of Christian doctrinal development, his sympathetic and yet critical view of Roman Catholicism, and his encounter with Hellenism, which eventually led to his reception into the Orthodox Church. Unlike Adolf Harnack who believed that the hellenization of the Christian faith was a corruption, Pelikan believed that for Christianity the turning towards Greece was indeed necessary

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<sup>1</sup> Open letter to members of Bethesda Lutheran Church, New Haven, Conn., the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America congregation to which Pelikan had belonged. “Pelikan to Orthodox church,” [http://www.thelutheran.org/article/article.cfm?article\\_id=1897](http://www.thelutheran.org/article/article.cfm?article_id=1897).

and providential. Even as early as the 1970s, when he published the first and second volumes of *The Christian Tradition: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100 -600)* in 1971 and *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600 - 1700)* in 1974, the writings of Pelikan revealed his love for and affinity with the Eastern Church.

Regarding the second volume, Robert Louis Wilken, a former student and friend of Pelikan, claimed that there was little evidence in his public life that Pelikan was moving towards Eastern Orthodoxy. However, if writing is autobiographical, one can trace his attraction towards the Eastern Church by his critical yet optimistic assessment of both the hellenization of Christianity and of the Greek Fathers. But it took quite a long time before Pelikan landed on the shore of Orthodoxy. It was only on 25 March 1998, at the age of 75, that Jaroslav Pelikan was chrismated in the Orthodox Church. To the bishop who received him, he said: "Any airplane that circled the airport for that long before landing would have run out of gas."<sup>2</sup> His reason for moving towards the Orthodox Church was both personal and theological, but it was not so much a conversion as a return to where he truly belonged.

Both the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church have a long history with their roots going back to the apostolic tradition. Compared to Protestantism, they have more to offer to their adherents in terms of dogmatic teaching and tradition. That Pelikan chose the Orthodox Church over the Catholic Church revealed his own Slavic background which is more at home in Eastern Orthodoxy. As an ardent admirer of Martin Luther, Pelikan believed that "one could be catholic and orthodox

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<sup>2</sup> Spoken to His Beatitude Metropolitan Theodosius regarding his late entry into the Orthodox Church. Jaroslav Pelikan, "A Personal Memoir: Fragments of a Scholar Autobiography," in: *Orthodoxy & Western Culture: A Collection of Essays Honoring Jaroslav Pelikan on His Eightieth Birthday* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), p. 44.

without being papal.”<sup>3</sup> Though he ended his life as an Orthodox Christian, his devotion to Luther and love for the spirit of catholicity remained. This paper concludes that Pelikan was indeed a true ecumenist who loved the Christian traditions he interpreted and who had given much thought to the importance of the ecumenical cause – the unity of Christians.

## 2 Slavic Heritage<sup>4</sup>

Born in Akron, Ohio, on 17 December 1923, Jaroslav Pelikan described his home as a place where there was an abundance of “good food (...) music, books, languages, and above all tradition and faith.” Of European Slavic descent, his father was from Slovakia and his mother from Yugoslavia. From his mother he acquired a “seriousness about the conduct of life” and from his father, “a deep and all-but-pantheistic sense of affinity with Nature.” Both his father and grandfather were Lutheran pastors who could preach eloquently and powerfully in their native Slovak as well as in English. Pelikan claimed that unlike many of his academic peers, he never had serious doubts about the fundamentals of Christianity because he possessed that simple “Slavic piety.” His father said that Jaroslav “combined German

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<sup>3</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600 – 1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 2. A person of the church, he was also at home with the Benedictine monks in St John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. Patrick Henry and Valerie Hotchkiss, *Was wir ererbt haben in Orthodoxy & Western Culture: A Collection of Essays Honoring Jaroslav Pelikan on His Eightieth Birthday* (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2005), p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> See See Jaroslav Pelikan, “A Personal Memoir: Fragments of a Scholar Autobiography,” in *Orthodoxy & Western Culture: A Collection of Essays Honoring Jaroslav Pelikan on His Eightieth Birthday* (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2005), pp. 29 – 44.

Lutheran scholarship and Slavic orthodox piety – and fortunately not vice versa.”<sup>5</sup>

Conscious of his minority status as a Slovak in the United States, he was determined to master German and other languages such as Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Czech, Serbian and Russian, besides Slovak and English. Alongside this gift of languages at an early age, Pelikan's ability to work long hours, to fall asleep instantly and his monkish temperament made him an ideal scholar. As a result he was able to complete both his B.D. at Concordia Seminary and Ph.D. at the University of Chicago in 1946 by the age of 23. As a church historian, Pelikan stood in the tradition of Adolf Harnack who wrote the *History of Dogma* (1896-9), but he sought to offer a different understanding of Christian doctrinal development. Pelikan had warned his readers – “we shall ignore Adolf Harnack at our peril”<sup>6</sup> – thus it is important to have some understanding of Harnack's fundamental ideas on early church history and the development of dogma.

### **3 Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930)**

The decline of the Christian faith, according to Harnack, is due to the transformation of the Gospel by Greek philosophy, which led to the formulation of dogma. A definite stage in Christian history, dogmatic Christianity stands between Christianity as the religion of the Gospel, which implies personal experience, and Christianity as a sacramental and cultic religion. The Christian faith aligned itself with either one or the other. It is

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<sup>5</sup> John H. Erikson, “Jaroslav Pelikan: The Living Legend in Our Mist” in *Orthodoxy & Western Culture: A Collection of Essays Honoring Jaroslav Pelikan on His Eightieth Birthday* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, “Introduction to the Torchbook Edition by Jaroslav Pelikan” in Adolf Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), p. vi.

obvious that Harnack favours primitive Christianity based on personal experience. When Christianity becomes intellectual, he asserts, “there is always the danger ...that as knowledge it may supplant religious faith, or connect it with a doctrine of religion, instead of with God and a living experience.”<sup>7</sup> This intellectualization of the Christian faith eventually leads to the secularizing of Christianity.

The formation of dogma, Harnack argues, is the work of the “Greek spirit on the soil of the Gospel.” The Gospel was expressed in Greek thought in order to make itself more intelligible to the Gentiles and it was through this hellenization of the Christian faith that the Church spread its influence and power over the ancient world and formed its peoples. Although Harnack acknowledges it as a triumph of the Christian spirit, he insists that the Gospel itself is not dogma, “for belief in the Gospel provides room for knowledge only in so far as it is a state of feeling and course of action that is a definite form of life.”<sup>8</sup> Contrary to Harnack, as we shall see, Pelikan has argued that it was Hellenistic culture that had been influenced by the spirit of the Hebrew Scripture and the Gospel, and not the other way round.

It is inevitable, in Harnack’s opinion that primitive Christianity had to disappear and become dogmatic Christianity so that it can compete with Greek rationalism. For example, in the second century, the Christian apologists attempted to equate Logos with Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup> This was to render the Christian faith as the rationalism of Greek thought and “thus marked out the task of ‘dogmatic’ and, so to speak, wrote the prolegomena for every future theological system in the Church.”<sup>10</sup> Clearly Harnack is

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<sup>7</sup> Adolph Harnack, *History of Dogma*, volume I, translated by Neil Buchanan, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1961), p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pp. 17 – 18.

<sup>9</sup> Adolf Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, translated by Thomas Bailey Saunders (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1957), pp. 202 – 203.

<sup>10</sup> Adolph Harnack, *History of Dogma*, volume II, translated by Neil Buchanan, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1961), p. 224.

against this dogmatization of the living faith because if Christianity is wedded to only one system of metaphysics, it limits its own relevance and life span. The Gospel, on the other hand, is timeless and universal.

Favouring Augustine, Harnack believes the doctor from Hippo was able to penetrate dogma to present a moral psychology of faith. Augustine had based his theology on his personal experience of faith rather than intellectual abstraction, and thus, he can be considered to be the origin of classic Protestantism. Harnack writes that Augustine has “rescued religion from its communal and cultus form and restored it to the heart.”<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, originally an Augustinian priest, was brought up in that tradition.

If Christianity is interpreted through the lens of one philosophical system, namely the Greco-Roman model, Harnack argues that it would outlive its usefulness. Robert Wilken proposes a different viewpoint when he says that we should now speak of the “Christianization of Hellenism.” We should not forget the debt owed to Jewish thought and the Jewish Bible, but we should also acknowledge the positive effect of Greek philosophy on the Christian faith especially in its emphasis on virtues and the moral life. Wilken writes: “one observes again and again that Christian thinking, while working within patterns of thought and conception rooted in Greco-Roman culture, transformed them so profoundly that in the end something quite new came into being.”<sup>12</sup> This idea of Wilken, supported by Pelikan, represents a turning away from Harnack’s thesis which had dominated the nineteenth and early twentieth century interpretation of Christian history.

Unlike Harnack, who believes that the development of church dogma represented a hardening of the gospel message, Pelikan

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<sup>11</sup> Adolf Harnack, *Outlines of the History of Dogma* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), p. 336.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Louis Wilken, *Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. xvi.

insists that Christian doctrines are more than just ideas and concepts; they are “what the Church believes, teaches, and confesses as it prays and suffers, serves and obeys, celebrates and awaits the coming of the kingdom of God.” It is also an expression of the broken state of Christian faith and witness, the most patent illustration of the truth of the apostolic admission is in 1 Corinthians 13: 12: “Now we see in a mirror dimly ... Now I know in part.”<sup>13</sup> Christian doctrines thus help us to get a glimpse of divine reality which no words can fully express. At the same time, it is also important to understand that Christian doctrines did not descend directly from God, but according to John Henry Newman, developed and evolved through time in history in an organic fashion. Both Pelikan and Newman believed in the importance of dogma in Christian faith.

#### **4 Development of Christian Doctrine**

An advocate of creedal Christianity, Pelikan like Newman, maintains that Christian doctrine is the principle of religion. As such, religion cannot last long when its dogmatic principles are denied because these principles give the faith its essence and impulse. In other words, religion cannot survive by emotions or ethical principles alone. For Pelikan, Christian doctrine refers to what the Church of Jesus believed, taught and confessed based on the Word of God. Be that as it may, Christian doctrine has also been a source of fierce contention among Christians and has led to the separation of churches. In fact, Newman identified the development of doctrine as the point of contention between Catholics and Protestants. In order to prove that nineteenth-century Roman Catholicism was the closest to the Church of Athanasius in the fourth century, in 1845 Newman wrote *Essay on Development of Christian*

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<sup>13</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Development of Christian doctrine: Some Historical Prolegomena* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), pp. 143 -144.

*Doctrine.* Although Newman understood that the dogmatic principle written in human language was imperfect, he insisted that it was necessary because dogmas are divinely revealed. Dogma was the Church's manner of expressing its tenets and must be held in faith. Seeking to critique Newman, Pelikan gave his own reflection on this topic from a Protestant point of view. Following Newman's criteria of authenticity, Pelikan first comments on "The Preservation of Type or Idea." Any development in the Catholic Church has to preserve the basic idea of the Church: thus catholicity must be used to distinguish genuine development from corruption. Protestants like Harnack and Sebastian Franck believed the development of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, creed and canon in the Catholic Church was a corruption of apostolic Christianity. This is what divides some Protestants from other Protestants, and Protestants from all Catholics.<sup>14</sup>

Newman held that in spite of the variety of doctrines, one can still discover a continuity of principles, and the truth and authenticity of these doctrines is based on fidelity to these continuing principles. But many Protestants argued that the continuity of the Church is not based on dogmatic principles, but on Christian experience – the "realm of inner experience." Supporting Friedrich Schleiermacher and Newman, Pelikan asserts that the authenticity of doctrinal development depends on its "congruence with inner experience." It is experience within "the setting of the Church – its memory, its witness, its celebrations," and not just any idiosyncratic emotions.<sup>15</sup>

The Church, Newman taught, has the power to assimilate extra-Christian sources for the purpose of evangelization; it is able to adopt pagan philosophy, existing rites and customs of the people for its own Christian development. As we have seen,

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<sup>14</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Development of Christian Doctrine: Some Historical Prolegomena* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15 – 16.

Harnack had a contrary view regarding the Church's power of assimilation – he saw it as a betrayal, a sell-out to the process of hellenization. Although the Harnack school of thought has lost some of its prestige, Pelikan acknowledges that its position is still influential in some circles. In fact, Karl Barth, another great Protestant theologian of the twentieth century, was totally against Christian assimilation of alien elements.<sup>16</sup>

Protestantism teaches that any doctrinal development must be based on explicit reference to the Scripture – *sola Scriptura*. Otherwise it is a corruption. Looking at specific doctrinal issues, Newman taught that: “Scripture must be said to contain implicitly the doctrines that the later doctrinal development of the Church has made explicit in creed and dogmatic decree.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, we must pay attention to traditions apart from the Bible. In his apparent move to support Newman's idea, Pelikan argues that different Protestant denominations have different understandings of *sola Scriptura*. The Reformers had used tradition in their reading of Scripture to support their position. Further, *sola Scriptura* has itself become an indispensable tradition for Protestants in their theological works.

There is a logical sequence in doctrinal development according to Newman, for example, the doctrine of the incarnation leads to the understanding that Mary is the Mother of God. There is a systematic connection between these two doctrines and this proves that the development is genuine. Luther, however, objected to this: a theologian need not be a logician – “In vain does one fashion a logic of faith ... No syllogistic form is valid when applied to divine terms.”<sup>18</sup> Supporting Luther's view, Pelikan argues that the authenticity of Christian doctrine is to be found in its biblical source and not in the structure of the doctrinal system. In reflecting on Newman's understanding of

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, pp. 17 – 18.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 21.

doctrinal development in 1969, Pelikan reveals the Reformer's principle with his stress on *sola Scriptura* and the inner experience of our Christian faith.

Regarding "preservative additions," Newman argues that dogmas are needed to preserve the faith that the Church confesses and therefore, if one is obedient to the Church, one must uphold its dogmas. But classic Protestant teaching, according to Pelikan, maintains that "dogmas were merely summaries of scriptural doctrine." The Church's role is a passive one in the formulation of dogmas. Christians subscribe to doctrines contained in the Creed not because they are in the Creed, but because they are also in the Scriptures. In fact, Protestants believe that there has been no development of Christian doctrine since the apostolic times and therefore, other than the doctrines taught by the apostles in the Scriptures, everything else is error and destructive to the faith.<sup>19</sup>

The fact that the Catholic Church has endured for such a long time, expressed as "chronic continuance" by Newman, shows that its doctrinal development has been authentic. But Protestants, like Harnack, believed that primitive Christianity has disappeared to give way to institutional Christianity represented by the Catholic Church. Chronic continuance, in the Protestant view, reveals the inauthentic nature of doctrinal development.<sup>20</sup>

In presenting the Protestant response to Newman's essay on doctrinal development, Pelikan also insists that theologians are merely "spokesmen" for the church but not "corporate popes." At the same time, his catholic affinities are revealed when he writes: "It was the sacramental life of the community, not the speculation of its theologians that brought forth Cyprian's doctrine of original sin. Similarly, the religious life ... was responsible for the evolution of the doctrine of Mary in the

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 22 – 23.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 23 – 24.

thought of Athanasius.” Pelikan acknowledges that Newman’s emphasis on the Church as community in his writings “provided a much-needed corrective to the emphasis of German Lutheran *Dogmengeschichte* on the great ideas of the great theologians – an overemphasis that has had as its almost unavoidable corollary a preoccupation with discontinuity.”<sup>21</sup> This statement reflects Pelikan’s intention to move away from Harnack’s theory of the early church characterized by discontinuity. It also reveals his affinity with Catholicism or more concretely, with the spirit of catholicity, which he believed all genuine Christian traditions possess. In *The Riddle of Roman Catholicism*, Pelikan presents a sympathetic and yet critical account of the Roman Church. In my opinion, it is as sympathetic as it could be, written by a theologian from a Lutheran perspective, in the United States, in the late 1950s.

## 5 The Western Church

First of all, Pelikan considers the development of catholic Christianity as valid. For him, catholicity means “identity plus universality”: identity here means that it is distinct from the world and universality means it embraces all humankind.<sup>22</sup> Christianity became catholic when it moved out of the confines of Judaism towards the non-Jews. The ministry of Jesus was not a nationalistic message, but a universal salvation for all peoples. Pelikan also claims that the church became catholic when it established an episcopal ministry with priests and bishops. In the New Testament, Jesus instituted the apostolic office.<sup>23</sup> The development of the sacraments and liturgy also helped to make

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 144.

<sup>22</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Riddle of Roman Catholicism* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1959), 22.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

the church catholic as they seek to satisfy the longing of people for forgiveness and immortality.<sup>24</sup>

In theology, catholic Christianity clarifies its identity and universality. Pelikan maintains that theology helped the church to define and defend its teaching against the distortions of heretics and thus, catholic means orthodox. In many ways, heresies helped the church to clarify and define precisely the core of its teachings namely, creation, redemption and revelation. Pelikan's partiality towards the East is revealed when he considers Origen (more on him later) as "the catholic theologian" because he was able to combine the defence of the faith with a profound knowledge of the Scriptures which few could do then and even now.<sup>25</sup>

The Primacy of Rome is questioned by Pelikan who insists on the uniqueness and prestige of Jerusalem as narrated in the New Testament. For him, Jerusalem should be regarded as the mother church as acknowledged by Paul himself. In the early church, all matters were settled in Jerusalem. Although Pelikan questions the authority of Rome, he also acknowledges the Primacy of Peter – Peter comes first in the apostolic college.<sup>26</sup> But what makes Rome prestigious was the orthodoxy of its bishops. Throughout the history of doctrinal development in the church, Pelikan writes, the popes "manifested an astonishing capacity to select and formulate – or to take credit for – the orthodox solution to thorny theological questions."<sup>27</sup> In doctrinal disputes, Rome showed its ability and orthodoxy. It

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 27. McGrath notes that in the twentieth century, western theologians were very interested in the notions of "catholicity" which were dominant in the Orthodox churches. "Catholicity" is often expressed in Russian as "*Sobornost*" which generally means "universality." Alister E. McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 265.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pp. 29 – 30.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 35.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 39.

was not just because Rome had better strategy in the worldly sense, but that Rome was able to put forward intrinsically valid theological formulas that were accepted by the orthodox majority. Aided by scripture and tradition, Rome had this uncanny ability to distinguish the core of the faith from its speculative elements. In short, Pelikan argues that Rome enjoyed a unique position among the patriarchates because of its orthodoxy, location and freedom.<sup>28</sup>

In spite of his sympathetic and favourable review of the Catholic Church, Pelikan is also critical of the attempt by the Roman Church to dominate the Eastern Church after the Siege of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade in 1204. Supporting Eastern Orthodox writers, he is of the opinion that it was the Crusaders' brutality that led to the split between Rome and the East. Pelikan also points out that in modern times, Catholic leaders have admitted their mistakes in trying to Latinize Eastern liturgical traditions, but unfortunately Rome had refused to be merely first among equals.<sup>29</sup> Unlike Protestantism, which Rome does not consider as churches, the churches of the East remained churches. Hence Rome is keen to achieve unity with Eastern Orthodoxy and is willing to let the Eastern Churches retain their own rites, traditions and patriarchs. Unfortunately, Pelikan laments, due to bad experiences in the past, very few Orthodox leaders take Rome's friendly gestures seriously. This brings us to Pelikan's discussion of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, which finally became his spiritual home.

## **6 The Eastern Church**

In order to grasp Jaroslav Pelikan's profound affinity with the Orthodox Spirit later in his life, it is necessary to understand his

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, pp. 39-42.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 43.

nanced and in-depth view on the hellenization of Christianity based on his reading of the Cappadocian Fathers and others. A clear indication that Pelikan had a deep love for Greek culture and language is seen in the dedication of his work, *Christianity and Classical Culture*: "To my daughter, Miriam, who has deepened and enriched my own encounter with Hellenism." To begin, Pelikan regards the fact that the New Testament was written in Greek and not in Hebrew or Aramaic as a great convergence of mind and spirit in human history. This means that any other translation of the Christian scripture has to take into consideration its understanding of Greek semantics and syntax. Not only Scripture, but also Christian doctrine was expressed with precision in Greek, revealing the superiority of Eastern theology. Furthermore, not even Latin words can match the sophistication of Greek in expressing the various doctrinal controversies. In fact, the Orthodox Christians believed that the Light comes from the East - *Ex Oriente Lux* - "an affirmation of the special destiny of the East," and thus, they disparaged the West as a symbol of the "godless souls in the deep hell of ignorance."<sup>30</sup>

The Christians thinkers despised the Greek religious beliefs but upheld their philosophical outlook. For example, Clement of Alexandria called upon his colleagues to combine Scripture with the writings of Homer: "Philosophy is a long-lived exhortation, wooing the eternal love of wisdom, while the commandment of the Lord is far-shining, 'enlightening the eyes.'" Clement was a Christian apologist steeped in Platonic doctrine that taught the pre-existence of the soul and at the same time he was also against Gnosticism.<sup>31</sup> Thus we see that the borrowing of Greek concepts was not a straight-forward process. In fact, Henry Chadwick argued that it is misleading to

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<sup>30</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600 - 1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 2 - 3.

<sup>31</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100 - 600)*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 47 - 48.

consider Clement a hellenizer because he was very attached to the Church.<sup>32</sup> The same can be said of other Christian apologists; they quoted Scripture to support philosophy which in turn was modified to fit Scripture.

Contrary to many Western scholars who believed that there was not much doctrinal development in the East, Pelikan, in the second volume of *The Christian Tradition: The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600 – 1700)*, attempts to show that there was indeed lively doctrinal development in the Orient. His affinity with Orthodox theology and piety is obvious in his detailed analysis of the theological controversies that occurred in the Eastern Church. It is also a mistake, Pelikan argues, to think that there is no one as brilliant and as creative as Augustine of Hippo among the Greek theologians. Regarding this, he considers Origen of Alexandria to be Augustine's equal in his theological writings.

### **6.1 Origen of Alexandria**

Origen was a “consistent hellenizer”: in his writings we see the constant tension between biblical and philosophical doctrines. Dismissing the literal resurrection of the body, Origen insisted that this literal doctrine was allegorical because “in the body there lies a certain principle which is not corrupted from which the body is raised in corruption.”<sup>33</sup> Acknowledging the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, he believed that the soul existed before time. In Origen, both biblical doctrine and philosophical speculation form part of his theologizing. As mentioned earlier, Pelikan considers Origen the “catholic theologian” and a church's man to be judged according to the intellectual climate of his time.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 55.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 48.

## 6.2 The Cappadocian Fathers

Besides Origen, the three Cappadocian Fathers, Basil of Caesarea, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus, in their joint accomplishment as Christian thinkers in the Eastern Church, could also match up to Augustine's influence in the Latin West. They were Hellenists, having studied classical Greek literature and philosophy, but they were not uncritical of its influence in their theological expositions.<sup>34</sup> In fact, Pelikan claims that they were constantly engaging with the monuments of Greek culture, its thought processes and concepts, in order to refine their own understanding of natural theology and Christian revelation. In *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, Pelikan's bias towards the Greek Fathers is evident in his treatment of the doctrine of the trinity: he focused much more on the teaching of the Cappadocians than on Augustine's *de Trinitate*. Unlike Harnack who considered Augustine such a monumental figure in the history of Christianity, Pelikan emphasized the writings of the Greek Fathers.

The Cappadocians taught that Greek culture is not to be shunned but cultivated, because a believer can benefit from pagan learning, just as Moses' training in Egyptian culture enabled him to become a great teacher and leader. Likewise, Basil became the champion of Christian Hellenism and he was at the same time critical of some of its aspects. An example of Hellenistic influence is the sophisticated style of writing that the Cappadocians learned in their classical education. Having benefitted greatly from reading pagan books, Basil in his educational treatise, *Ad adolescentes de legendis libris gentilium*, gave a positive assessment of Greek classical learning. It would

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<sup>34</sup> See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 3 – 9.

be a grave mistake, Basil warned, if anyone abandoned classical learning as an excuse for embracing the Christian faith. In their opposition to the emperor Julian the Apostate, who wanted to break the alliance between Christianity and Greek culture, the Cappadocians insisted on speaking, writing and thinking in Greek in their theological treaties and exhortations.<sup>35</sup> According to them, it is obvious that one can be Hellenistic without embracing the Greek deities and myths.

In spite of their admiration for Hellenistic classical learning and culture, especially the Greek language, these theologians never failed to extol the simplicity and beauty of the Hebrew Scripture and faith that they believed to be far superior to Greek wisdom.<sup>36</sup> In other words, the Cappadocians adopted a rather ambivalent attitude towards Greek classical learning: they loved the Greek language but were very critical of its myths, religion, and various aspects of Hellenistic philosophy. An example of their love for the classical language, Pelikan remarks, is the fact that much of the vocabulary used in Christian liturgy was borrowed from classical Greek, e.g., "*panēgyrizein* (to celebrate) and *heortazein* (to keep a festival)."<sup>37</sup>

Against Greek religious belief, worship and myths, the Cappadocian teachers, aligned themselves with pagan Greek thinkers in natural theology and rationalistic philosophy for they were conscious of the distinction between Greek religious belief and their critical thinking. It is in natural theology, Pelikan argues, that fruitful encounter between Hellenism and Christianity took place. Quoting Werner Jaeger, he writes: "the Greek spirit reached its highest religious development, not in the cults of the gods ... but chiefly in philosophy, assisted by the Greek gift for constructing systematic theories of the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, pp. 10 – 12.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p.12.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

universe.”<sup>38</sup> It is through Greek philosophical-scientific concepts and not their religious ideas that Christian thinkers developed their own natural theology. Formulated by Gregory of Nyssa, it was a method that made use of Scripture and human reasoning, joining divine and human knowledge, to formulate doctrines against heretical teachings. The Cappadocians also believed that it was faith that gives us the fullness of understanding.<sup>39</sup> Here we see another attitude towards Greek influence.

In spite of his praise and admiration for the use of Greek language in Scripture and theology, Pelikan cautions that the term “hellenization” is too simplistic to describe accurately the process and relationship between Greek culture and orthodox Christian doctrine. Christian doctrine expressed in Greek “bears the marks of its struggle to understand and overcome pagan thought.” The Christian apologists’ attitude towards ancient culture is “contradictory”: on the one hand, they try to bring out the contrast between Christianity and pagan thoughts, and on the other hand, the deeper contrast has been absorbed into Christian concepts. The apologists wanted to show that Christ was “the revealer of true philosophy” and at the same time he was also the fulfilment of ancient pagan philosophy.<sup>40</sup> They bring to our attention the constant tension and struggle in the encounter between Hellenism and Christianity. In other words, it was not a simple and straightforward process.

Pelikan teaches that the development of Christian doctrine is a process of “dehellenization” of the theology that was developing in the early church by placing limits on Greek speculative thoughts. Contact with Greek culture was an important development, a theological necessity, as it helped to preserve Christian orthodoxy by engaging with the pagan

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 26 – 27.

<sup>40</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100 - 600)*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 45-46.

philosophy. The question of the hellenization of Christianity is a complex and contradicting process. Pelikan believes that the struggle and tension that Greek influence had caused in the development of Christian doctrine was not a compromise with secularism as taught by Harnack, but part and parcel of God's plan to reach his people. Regarding this issue, Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, writes:

The encounter between the Biblical message and Greek thought did not happen by chance. The vision of Saint Paul, who saw the roads to Asia barred and in a dream saw a Macedonian man plead with him: "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" (cf. *Acts* 16:6-10) – this vision can be interpreted as a "distillation" of the intrinsic necessity of a rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek inquiry.

This inner rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry was an event of decisive importance not only from the standpoint of the history of religions, but also from that of world history – it is an event which concerns us even today.<sup>41</sup>

The fact remains: Christianity, originated in Palestine, but developed in the East before it emerged the West.

### **6.3 The Orthodox Tradition**

As a church historian, Pelikan appreciated the fact that the Orthodox Church has a long history compared to the Catholic and Protestant traditions.<sup>42</sup> It has preserved its ancient

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<sup>41</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, "Meeting with the Representatives of Science (Regensburg Lecture), [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2006/sep-tember/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060912\\_university-regensburg\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/sep-tember/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html).

<sup>42</sup> Jacobsen claims the Orthodox Church has the "longest history" among the four major Christian traditions: Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal. McGrath asserts that by the end of the first century, Christianity seemed to have established itself throughout the eastern

practices and traditions more fully than the other Christian churches. It is a tradition that is not fossilized but is fully alive as Pelikan famously puts it: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."<sup>43</sup> This means that Orthodox Christianity is a living faith connected with the past as well as with the present and future.

Regarding the issue of salvation, Orthodoxy's understanding is broader compared to that of Catholics and Protestants. It stresses the idea of *theosis* or deification of humanity and creation: "I have said, you are gods; and all of you are children of the most High" (Psalm 82:6). Athanasius said, "God became man so that man might become a god."<sup>44</sup> This means that we participate in God's divine life, not that we are his equals.

Accordingly, Orthodox theology possesses a much more positive attitude towards human nature than Catholicism and Protestantism. Human beings are weakened by sins, but they are not totally lost or depraved and thus, salvation is seen as a recovery from sickness.<sup>45</sup> As creator of the universe, it is logical to think that God desires to save the whole world, humans as well as all that is in it. This understanding of universal salvation in Orthodox tradition is known as *apokatastasis*. I believe it is this aspect of Orthodox teaching, this broad vision of universal

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Mediterranean world. Among the three important theological centres in the early church, the first two were Greek-speaking and the third was Latin speaking: Alexandria, Antioch and Western north Africa. See Douglas Jacobsen, *The World's Christians: Who they are, Where they are, and How they go there* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 13 and Alister E. McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 182 and 184.

<sup>43</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 65.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. St. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* or *On the Incarnation* 54:3, PG 25:192B; also *Catechism of the Catholic Church* paragraph 460, <http://www.philvaz.com/apologetics/a124.htm>.

<sup>45</sup> Douglas Jacobsen, *The World's Christians: Who they are, Where they are, and How they go there* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 18.

salvation, that Pelikan took to heart, as he was a person who truly loved the Christian traditions that he studied and interpreted as a church historian and theologian. In short, Pelikan was an ecumenical scholar who seriously sought the unity of all Christians.

## 7 The Ecumenical Cause

Pelikan believed that the ecumenical cause is important to the church. The unity we have is in Christ, and this gives hope to our ecumenical efforts. Further, all Christians, Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants, believe that the church is holy, catholic and apostolic, although they disagree on the definitions of each of these terms. Emphasizing that the holiness of the church is a gift of God, Pelikan maintains that even if Catholics and Protestants cannot agree on the meaning of holiness, they have at least admitted that they fall short of the holiness that is expected of them. Hence we have a unity of weakness.<sup>46</sup>

As we have seen, Pelikan has defined catholicity as identity plus universality, which is the ideal of both Catholics and Protestants. But he reminds us that both churches cannot achieve this ideal if they remain separated because Protestants “need Roman Catholicism to prove their own catholicity. Protestants are catholic if they realize that Roman Catholicism is Christian.”<sup>47</sup> The presence of the Eastern churches, Pelikan argues, shows that it is wrong to equate catholic with Roman Catholic. This understanding may form the basis of our effort to be united.

Regarding the apostolic nature of the church, Roman Catholics trace their roots to the promise that Jesus gives to Peter: “And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will

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<sup>46</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Riddle of Roman Catholicism* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1959), p. 184.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Mathew 16: 18). Protestants, on the other hand, insist that they are faithful to the apostolic scripture of the New Testament.<sup>48</sup> This means that apostolic origin is to be found in fidelity to the Bible and not in the authority of the popes who can and did err. Not stating explicitly who has the better argument, Pelikan, however, insists that apostolic does not mean uniformity as the New Testament testifies to the variety of its witness in Peter, Paul and Apollos – none of them alone makes the church apostolic. Pelikan writes: "The church will be apostolic when it finds its unity in the one Lord and one faith confessed by the apostles at the same time that it cultivates the unity-in-diversity manifested by the apostles."<sup>49</sup> This means that the church can remain together in spite of conflicts and disagreements in doctrines and customs as the clash between Peter and Paul in the early church has shown.

Besides focussing on areas of commonality, Pelikan looks at sources of ancient Christian faith for furthering the cause of Christian unity. They are: Scripture, Tradition, Early Fathers, the Reformation and Liturgy. Although the interpretation of Scripture has been one of the main sources of conflict and disagreement among Christians, Pelikan suggests that the historical-critical study of the Old Testament can bring Catholics and Protestants together. Further, he claims that Protestants are now paying more attention to the question of tradition, which is an authoritative voice for Catholics as well as Orthodox.<sup>50</sup>

Regarding the legacy of the early church fathers, Pelikan is delighted that Catholic theologians are gaining fresh insights from their study of Greek speaking theologians from the East. For example, they have interpreted Origen, not according to the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 187.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 188.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, pp. 191 – 193.

later standard of orthodoxy, but according to the importance of his writings at that time.<sup>51</sup> Thus the importance of historical-critical studies of scripture and church fathers has drawn Christians from different traditions closer together. Pelikan believes that if church leaders take this kind of study seriously, we can achieve further unity at the official level.

Regarding the legacy of the Reformation, Pelikan insists that Roman Catholics take seriously the gravity of this historical event and not dismiss it as another heresy or as the greatest apostasy in church history. For Pelikan, the Reformation is both tragic and necessary: it is tragic because both sides lost something valuable in the process and it is necessary because the reformers wanted the best and highest in Roman Catholicism. Thus, Pelikan calls upon his fellow Protestants to understand that the Reformation makes no sense apart from the Catholic context in which it happened.<sup>52</sup> Martin Luther, an Augustinian and scripture scholar, was brought up in the great tradition and piety of the Roman Catholic Church. Nothing can change this fact. This means that Protestants must take pride in the catholicity of their reformers and come to appreciate the beauty and genius of Catholicism at its best.

Through ecumenical contact with Catholicism, Protestant Christians can learn to appreciate and adopt the forms and rites of Catholic liturgy. Roman Catholics can also learn from Protestants the “evangelical forces” of preaching and hymn singing. Pelikan is of the opinion that liturgical exploration can be used as a method to understand more profoundly what divides and what unites Christians from different traditions.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p.195.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 199 – 200.

## **8 Conclusion**

Finally, Pelikan calls upon all Christians to bear the burden of separation through mutual support and “mutual responsibility to and for each other.”<sup>54</sup> Our common faith in the Lord must lead us to examine the strengths and weaknesses of our differences and to learn from one another. Pelikan maintains that neither Protestantism nor Catholicism possess the fullness of the Christian tradition. This means that we must seek to incorporate as much of the total Christian tradition into our own church. Thus Protestants must learn to strengthen their catholicity and Catholics must become more evangelical in their worship.<sup>55</sup> Deeply aware of the deficiencies and weaknesses of both Protestantism and Catholicism, Pelikan at last found what he believed to be the ideal Christian community for him – the Orthodox Church.

An ecumenist, Pelikan chose to embrace Orthodoxy at the end of his life because it has a long historical tradition going back to apostolic times; it possesses solid formulation of faith found in its ancient doctrines; it emphasizes an inner experience in its religious devotion; it has splendid and solemn liturgical rites as well as an established monastic tradition with its stress on the mystical life. All these can be found in one way or another in Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. But it is in the Orthodox Church, Pelikan believed, that they find their deepest and fullest expressions and it is here that he returned to rest.

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, p. 215.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 222 – 223.