

Professor Pelikan: A keen sense of what matters

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [June 13, 2006](#) issue

Church historian Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, who died May 13, felt like a relative, thanks to consanguinity among our Slovak friends. I could not have taught Christian history without using his books, though he could teach at least 39/40ths of what he taught without ever consulting one of mine.

People in our business say that no 20th-century scholar in the Christian East or West could have written what he did. Writing his five-volume work on *The Christian Tradition* demanded linguistic skills that were unmatched. The press reported that he spoke ten languages. I'd add "for starters." Once, riding in a shuttle bus with him, I heard him amiably chatting in a foreign language, and after disembarking I asked him what language it was. "Albanian." Albania was the most closed-off country in Europe in those years. How could he have learned conversational Albanian? "Oh, once you know one of those languages, you know them all." Oh.

In his 80s he was still the Wunderkind of legend. He holds the record for having completed a Ph.D. at the University of Chicago Divinity School in the shortest time. Within days he received his B.D. from the seminary, his Ph.D. from the university, ordination in the Lutheran Church, and the hand of Sylvia in marriage—the best gift he ever got. Though he was only four years older than me, I had him as a professor at both the M.Div. and Ph.D. levels.

While many of us thought Pelikan's true home was in the advanced seminar classroom, he also spoke to and wrote for the public. At Yale one year hundreds of undergraduates showed up for his course on Jesus, and envious New Haven townspeople wanted to get in on the lectures. So he repeated the course in the evening for the public.

Late in life he was received into the Orthodox Church. Those who knew him well saw that move not as desertion of Lutheranism but simply as the end of the period in which Lutherans had him on loan from Orthodoxy, his Slavic soul never having made

the trip that his body and mind had made into Western Christianity.

Fifty-plus years ago the fiancée of a Lutheran classmate, she being of Russian Orthodox extraction, wanted to be received into the Lutheran branch of the church catholic. Pelikan was her catechist. Testimony: "When Jary was through with her, she didn't know there was any big difference between Orthodoxy and Lutheranism."

Pelikan knew a thing or two about Luther. He wrote much on Luther and edited the American edition of Luther's works. But the theologian who meant the most to him was the Russian Orthodox scholar Georges Florovsky.

Some Christian scholars wanted Pelikan to show his churchly and "ordained" sides more. But his vocation, he always said, was "arts and sciences" and the place of theology among them.

I am told that near the end of his life he said something like: "If Christ is risen, nothing else matters. If Christ is not risen, nothing else matters." Sacredly and secularly, Jary had a keen sense of what matters. And to those of us who learned from him and were his friends, that matters still.