Wide-angle historian: Jaroslav Pelikan (1923-2006)

by David C. Steinmetz in the August 22, 2006 issue

Jaroslav Pelikan was not a historian easy to characterize. Most historians of Christianity pick some small subfield from the past, which becomes the focus of their research and writing. The really good historians will push back the boundaries of what is known in their subfield or find new and imaginative ways to read old evidence from it.

Although Pelikan was associated in his early life with Reformation studies—especially with Luther studies—and in his later life with the study of early Christianity, he is unlikely to be remembered primarily as a Reformation scholar or as a historian of the early church.

Pelikan had a larger ambition. He aspired to be an interpreter of the entire Christian past and to explain its development from its earliest beginnings to the present. He seemed determined to understand it all, every twist and turn, and to explain what he understood as clearly as he could to the cultured elites, inside and outside of the church, who were ignorant of it.

In that sense Pelikan was not a historian's historian. He did not write primarily for other members of the historical guild (though, undoubtedly, professional historians were among his readers). As a historian Pelikan was very much an inner-directed man.

Only an inner-directed historian would have decided to write a new history of doctrine to correct the classic history of dogma written in the late 19th century by the great Protestant church historian Adolf von Harnack. It was a project from an earlier age, the kind of massive multivolume study that even Germans, who love massive multivolume works, were no longer attempting.

Pelikan intended to challenge Harnack's interpretation on several fronts. Whereas Harnack did not discuss Byzantine Christianity and stopped his history at the Reformation—as though the development of doctrine after Augustine was primarily a Western phenomenon that ended in the 16th century—Pelikan included both, Byzantine and post-Reformation Christianity.

Furthermore, Pelikan regarded Harnack as a "reductionist liberal" who studied the past not to cherish it but to liberate himself from its power. Chief among the past errors Harnack deplored and wished to overcome through historical study was the use of Greek metaphysics by the early church.

Metaphysics obscured rather than clarified the heart of the Christian gospel as Harnack understood it. For him the center of the Christian faith was a set of moral values embodied in the preaching of Jesus. Jesus came preaching the "Fatherhood of God" and the "brotherhood of man." It was a simple message, easy for the German middle class to understand, and light years away from the metaphysical speculations of Nicaea and Chalcedon about "substance" and "person," speculations that lost the historical Jesus and substituted an "imagined" Christ.

Not so, argued Pelikan. Harnack's misguided correction to the Christian past needed itself to be corrected. While theology involves ethics, it can never be reduced to a moral code, however radical or grounded in the preaching of Jesus. Harnack's attempt to do so rendered him tone-deaf to the rich theological melody of the Christian past. It was a mistake that Pelikan (who was always comfortable within the boundaries of classical Christian orthodoxy) did not intend to repeat.

Writing a comprehensive work brings with it enormous difficulties for historians intent on mastering details and avoiding a superficial treatment of their complex subject. All historical writing requires historians to “go native.” They must learn the languages, customs, intellectual assumptions and even the humor of the people they are studying. This is particularly true for historians of Christianity, who attempt to interpret a movement that adapts well to new cultures and has been adapting over and over again for two millennia.

Most historians shy away from projects that place too heavy a linguistic burden on their research. But Pelikan did not only know the classical theological languages of Greek, Hebrew and Latin; he was also a master of Slavic languages, from Slovakian to Russian. He was therefore uniquely equipped to interpret the Orthodox East as well as the Catholic and Protestant West.

Anyone who has read Pelikan on the Czech reformer Jan Hus knows how important his mastery of Slavic languages was for the success of his project. Suddenly, it was no longer sufficient to talk about the history of doctrine and omit all reference to eastern Christianity after Chalcedon. Thanks to Pelikan, any new history of Christian thought that omits the Slavs and the Greeks would be regarded by the scholarly community as a truncated and therefore fundamentally misleading history.

“Going native,” however, is only part of the historian’s task. Interpreters must interpret. They must explain to their readers in language and categories their readers can understand what they have learned from studying the writings and artifacts of an alien place and time.

What they are not allowed to do is correct the opinions of the past or re-clothe long-dead figures in the fashions of the present. Calvin was not a feminist or a Barthian, however much some modern historians might want him to be. The past is always unalterable. Historians may misinterpret what happened, but they cannot change it.

Furthermore, “going native” never means that historians serve as cheerleaders for past figures of whom they particularly approve or misrepresent other figures of whom they disapprove. Their task as historians is to enable the voices of Christians from distant ages to be heard again by a church that may have forgotten them and desperately needs to hear them again.

This does not mean that historians of Christianity have been deprived of the right to make normative judgments about the past—but only that they make those judgments as theologians, speaking constructively to the church, rather than as historians, clarifying what was once believed and taught. Pelikan knew that he was not doing his job properly if he did not explain Arius and Athanasius with equal enthusiasm and clarity. Being an orthodox Christian was no excuse for writing bad history.

In short, historians must be methodologically humble, even if they are not humble in any other way. They must accept the past on its terms rather than on their own. If they do so, they will find that the past can prove enormously instructive, often in unexpected and boundary-breaking ways. But if they do not, they will hear in their interpretation of the past only the echo of their own voice.

In all these respects Pelikan was a master of his craft. He met the past on its own terms, learning the languages, customs and intellectual assumptions of Christians who inhabited a world very different from his own. He wrote what he learned in a lucid and elegant prose easily accessible to general readers, whatever their worldview.

Pelikan’s long career demonstrated that it is possible to combine a broad vision of the Christian past with an astonishing mastery of historical detail. As a result, his work has instructed readers inside and outside the church in ways that often sundered old intellectual boundaries, especially the boundaries between East and West.