

A Remembrance



Photo credit: John Earle

Jaroslav Jan Pelikan

Jaroslav Pelikan, who died May 23, 2006, was the kind of intellectual colleagues might call “a scholar’s scholar” or “an historian’s historian.” If such titles characteristically connote devotion to a specialty at the expense of awareness of or service to a larger world, they would be too confining for Pelikan.

Fellows of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences would be the first to attest to his administrative skills, his vision for institutional programs, his collegial spirit, and his devotion to his responsibilities. He served as the Academy’s President (1994 – 1997), having previously participated in numerous programs and served in various advisory capacities.

A familiar figure at Academy gatherings, he could cross disciplines with finesse and converse on an astonishing range of subjects. The Sterling Professor of History at Yale was capable of performing on the piano, and once shared a stage with cellist Yo-Yo Ma. While producing his book *Bach Among the Theologians*, he formed a close relationship with the late conductor Robert Shaw. A humanist, he took seriously the scientific enterprises in the Academy and impressed the Fellows with the generous ways he recognized their achievements and featured them in programs.

The Academy did not and could not have Professor Pelikan to itself. He was also President of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences as well as president of several religious historical societies. He was the first Chairman of the Council of Scholars at the Library of Congress, where he was awarded the Kluge Prize in 2004, the “Nobel-level” award in the humanities. The National Endowment for the Humanities recognized his many contributions to the humanities by naming him the twelfth Jefferson Lecturer. He also delivered the Gifford Lectures on Christianity and Classical Culture at the University of Aberdeen in 1992 – 1993. He was Dean of graduate studies at Yale from 1973 – 1978, where he mentored many graduate students and excelled as an undergraduate lecturer.

A scholarly prodigy, he received his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago in 1946, when he was twenty-four years old – he’d been typing for twenty-one years by then – the same year he received the Bachelor of Divinity degree and married Sylvia Burica. She shared his interest in the humanities and was a familiar figure at Academy events.

That “many” regarded him the foremost historian of Christianity in the past half century, as some obituaries had it, is a safe generalization; it is hard to think of a peer. His *exemplum*, Adolf Harnack, with whom he had fundamental disagreements, would be the only challenger to his superior reputation. Pelikan’s main mark in that field was his magisterial five-volume *History of the Christian Tradition*.

Those who worked in fields similar to his were awed at the knowledge and equipment he brought to them. I have had sixty years to observe and reflect, all the way back to the time when the newlywed Martys in the 1950s babysat for the Pelikans. What dazzled me most, as it has astounded others, was his ability to read, speak, and write in many languages. For his role in editing twenty-two volumes of *Luther’s Works*, he handled late-medieval Latin and early-modern German as any scholar in that field would. For *History of the Christian Tradition*, he put his reading knowledge of more than ten languages to work.

Foreign Honorary Members of the Academy can testify to the ease with which he spoke their languages. My most vivid recall was of an occasion when we were being shuttled to the National Humanities Center in North Carolina. As we got off, I could not resist asking what language he’d been using to converse with a seatmate, a guest of the Center. “Oh, that was Albanian.” (This was when Albania was the most closed-off state behind the Iron Curtain.) How could he do that? This proud son-of-a-Serb said, “Oh, if you know one of those languages, you know them all.”

Though a popular writer, he did not court popularity, a fact that is evidenced by his choice of subject matter. Words like “Tradition,” “Orthodoxy,” “Dogma,” and “Doctrine” are hardly candidates for inclusion in titles of bestsellers. His works on *Jesus Through the Centuries* and *Mary Through the Centuries*, however, were very widely circulated and translated into numerous languages. Like few other scholars in his time, he straddled the zones often marked “secular” and “religious,” was at home in both, and fostered informed conversation among fellow scholars who had felt more at ease in only one of them. Fortunately, through his long career of teaching first at the University of Chicago and then at Yale, he nurtured and stimulated generations of scholars who continue to work in the fields he cultivated, so his influence will only grow.

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