

A Christian Sheen on a Secular World

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THE MAIN TITLE of one of Professor Jaroslav Pelikan's most challenging books—*Jesus Through The Centuries*—moves a reader to hold it in one's hand, like a letter from an unknown sender that one turns back and forth before opening it, wondering much about the sender and the message the letter might contain. For *Jesus Through The Centuries*, by its very subtitle, excludes a treatise on dogma, the development of the faith, or some other theological scholarship.¹ It promises to deal with Jesus "in the history of culture." The setting is familiar, but which "Jesus" would fit into it? The "historical" Jesus, the "son of the carpenter from Nazareth," as his neighbors described him? Or the figure fleetingly mentioned in Josephus and Tacitus? Neither of these Jesus figures deserves any kind of place in history. The other Jesus, however, is the unique person who has so overwhelmingly impressed spiritually sensitive followers that they have felt a need to bestow on him sacred names and titles in Jesus's own lifetime and after his death, for centuries.

From the outset the Jesus who is remembered is wholly what Bultmann called a "faith event," the term slightly hinting at something that is real only to a certain kind of subjective imagination. Still, one need not take the term in this sense, for faith at its best has no idiosyncratic character. It is a steady and loving openness to those aspects of reality that lie beyond sense impressions and include the mysteries attending nature, history, and every human life. It is true that people of faith have sensitivities others may be lack-

ing, and that they apperceive meanings where others would not even think of looking, but the same applies, for instance, to those who are in love. Designating Jesus as a "faith event" does not imply any reductionism but rather a wider horizon. It was this Jesus whose experience, in others, marked an epoch in human history. Throughout history epoch-making events have been experiences of timeless meaning in the flow of time. In Jesus's case this would refer not to the experience of Jesus himself, which might have become an object of knowledge had he written a book, but rather the experiences Jesus called forth in people of faith.

By way of comparison, we do have Plato's description of his soul's movements in the process of "discovering the mind:" "wondering," "seeking," "being drawn," "questioning," "loving."² It is also significant that behind Plato's own experiences there is his experience of Socrates which moved him to put most of his work into the mouth of Socrates. Socrates, too, wrote no book, but the Socrates who entered history is the figure of Plato's dialogues, also a kind of "faith event." In Jesus's life it might have seemed that he headed in the same direction as Socrates, for the first title conferred on him by many was "rabbi," or teacher. Soon, however, it turned out that this designation could not sufficiently capture the true dimension of Jesus's person. As Pelikan puts it:

The future belonged to the titles "Christ" and "Lord" as names for Jesus, and to the

identification of him as the Son of God and the second person of the Trinity. It was not merely in the name of a great teacher, not even in the name of the greatest teacher who ever lived, that Justinian built Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and Johann Sebastian Bach composed the *Mass in B-Minor*. There are no cathedrals in honor of Socrates (17).

That is precisely why the title of Pelikan's book makes one wonder how the work could be brought about. For there is no Jesus in universal memory other than the one of Christian experience, and the Jesus of the dogma calls for the bent knee rather than for a treatise on culture. Perhaps this particular approach could not have occurred to anybody, nor been carried to success by anybody, but Jaroslav Pelikan. A man of broad and profound erudition, a scholar of recognized authority who has authored three volumes on *The Christian Tradition*, a Lutheran, and Sterling Professor and de Vane Lecturer at Yale, he is a man who combines professional detachment, lively faith, and poetic sensitivity. Tackling a paradoxical enterprise, the cultural mirroring of high spiritual experiences, he succeeds astonishingly, superbly, convincingly, memorably. It does not take away from his success that it appears more pronounced in the first half of the book, in chapters each of which is linked to one of the names or titles conferred on Jesus by the faithful. In his later chapters Pelikan himself must hunt, in the literature, for a suitable characterization of Jesus that could represent the culture of a period, e.g., the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, romanticism, modernity. "I think I have always wanted to write this book," he says at the beginning of the Preface. The fulfillment of a life's wish is indeed a joyful event, and Pelikan's joy is contagious.

How does he proceed? We have seen that one must start with the dogmata elicited, by Jesus's appearance, from the faithful, but Pelikan deals with them as data, avoiding any trace of preaching, for he aims not at the dogma but at the image or images of Christ in a succession of cul-

tures. For instance, take this remark about Jesus Christ and history:

"The time is fulfilled . . . in these last days": it is obvious from these and other statements of the early generations of Christian believers that as they carried out the task of finding a language that would not collapse under the weight of what they believed to be the significance of the coming of Jesus, they found it necessary to invent a grammar of history . . . [appropriating] the schema of historical meaning that had arisen in the interpretation of the redemption of Israel accomplished by the exodus from Egypt, and adapted this schema to the redemption of humanity accomplished by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (21f.).

No description of a strange religion could be more neutral than this, even though a believing Christian wrote it. He knows when it is imperative for him to preserve the discipline of scholarly detachment, even in matters close to his heart. That applies also to the conclusion:

Thus the entire history of Israel had reached its turning point in Jesus as prophet, as priest, and as king. After the same manner, he was identified as the turning point in the entire history of all the nations of the world, as that history was encapsulated in the history of the "mistress of nations," the Roman empire.

What evidence does he mention? Not, primarily, Augustine's *City of God*, even though Pelikan does acknowledge the key role of this work. But for the effects on general culture he selects the history of Eusebius of the events of his own lifetime, the fourth century, and Athanasius's biography of Saint Antony. Eusebius, who knew Constantine personally and deeply appreciated the significance of that emperor's conversion and victory, nevertheless finds the decisive event in his narration not in the fourth century but in the life of Jesus Christ. That, for him, was the event with universal-historical implications. Similarly, the history of Antony's personal life centers ultimately on Jesus Christ, rather than the hermit himself: "Although the purpose of the book is to present Antony as the embodiment of an

ideal, that does not prevent Athanasius from describing his life as an existential struggle, and a struggle that never ends until death. Throughout, it is an effort to describe Antony's life as 'the work of the Savior in Antony.' The image of Jesus Christ creates perspectives of history both in public life and in the life of a particular person.

Sometimes, Pelikan describes the broad cultural effect of Jesus's image more in hints than in full elaboration, particularly in the fourth chapter, "The King of Kings." "King" appeared in Pilate's inscription on the cross of Jesus, as it also did in the Book of Revelation where earthly monarchs are seen acclaiming Christ as "Lord of lords, and King of kings." Pelikan briefly mentions divergent political theories flowing from there: one thing celebrates Constantine's empire as the ultimate fruition of beginnings in Jesus himself and in Augustus, the emperor of universal peace; another manifests itself in Pope Leo I's successful attempt to stop Attila the leader of the Huns from taking Rome, displaying the power which Christ was said to have conferred on the apostles as the first bishops; a third opposes the political kingship of Christ "both in the name of the autonomy of the political order and in the name of the eternal kingship of Christ."

Pelikan gives too little attention to the broadest political development stemming from Jesus Christ: the disappearance of that type of state in which priests were high state officials, and temples and rites were the foremost political institutions. The meaning of Christ's kingship for human life lay beyond and above the political sphere, so that the apparatus of political rule could no longer be seen as the sovereign agent of worship and salvation. Thus, first in Augustine's penetrating analysis and then in the formula coined by Pope Gelasius, two rules and two allegiances came to be distinguished, *sacerdotium* and *imperium*, spiritual and secular rule. Cultural results were found not only in the acknowledged tension between man's legal order and the higher destiny of his soul, but also in the phenom-

enon of the limited state, political rule operating within certain permanent confinements. From the sixth century and on, the limited state has been the hallmark of Western civilization. This basic trait alone can account for what Albert Camus has called the "metaphysical rebellion" of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for our distinction between political and non-political dimensions of life, and for the Western experience of totalitarian power as an abomination. The Western concept of politics and its limits is certainly one of the broadcast cultural effects of Jesus Christ.

Another concept, possibly broader, is treated in the fifth chapter entitled "The Cosmic Christ." This is a curious title, considering what the chapter says, which opens with a quotation from Alfred North Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World* (1925) concerning the contribution of medievalism to the formation of the scientific movement and the belief that

every detailed occurrence can be correlated with its antecedents in a perfectly definite manner, exemplifying general principles. Without this belief the incredible labours of scientists would be without hope. It is this instinctive conviction, vividly poised before the imagination, which is the motive power of research:—that there is a secret, a secret which can be unveiled. How has this conviction been so vividly implanted on the European mind? . . . It must come from the medieval insistence on the rationality of God, conceived of as with the personal energy of Jehovah and with the rationality of a Greek philosopher (57).

Whitehead's surmise, at that time not proven, was concretely confirmed by the researches into medieval science by Pierre Duhem and, more recently, the numerous books on the subject by Stanley L. Jaki, theologian, philosopher, and physicist. Several fourteenth-century scholars, among them Buridan and Nicole Oresme, reflecting on Aristotle's cosmology in the light of the Christian faith in the world's creation *ex nihilo* by God, corrected both Aristotle's law of motion and "his insistence on the eternity of the heavens, the

endless recurrence of the same ideas and views. 'This is not true,' reads Oresme's terse rebuttal."⁴ Through Whitehead, Pelikan points to the entire phenomenon of modern science as essentially linked to faith in Jesus Christ.

Which of his titles is hidden under the chapter heading, "The Cosmic Christ"? It is the title "Logos" as found in the opening of the Gospel according to John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . All things were made through Him and without Him nothing was made that was made." Pelikan comments:

Because the speaking of God (which is one way to translate Logos) made the world possible, it was also the speaking of God that made the world intelligible: Jesus Christ as Logos was the *Word of God* revealing the way and will of God to the world. As the medium of divine revelation, he was also the agent of divine revelation, specifically of revelation about the cosmos and its creation. His "credibility" was fundamental to all human understanding (59).

The Christian fathers drew from this insight far-reaching conclusions: "There was, therefore, an analogy between the Logos of God, which had become incarnate in Jesus, and the logos of humanity, which was incarnate in each person and perceptible to each person from within" (63). After certain starts in false directions (a tendency to glorify the irrational on the one hand and a rash claim that the mind has power to know everything about God on the other), the consensus of the Fathers settled on "the cosmos [that] was reliably knowable and at the same time mysterious, both of these because the Logos was the Mind and Reason of God" (65). We have seen how this deep conviction in the fourteenth century led to corrections of Aristotle by Christian scholars that prefigured some of Newton's principles. These utterly new thoughts were passed on through Leonardo to Galileo, so that the astonishing enterprise of modern science was finally being born in Christian culture after several still births in ancient Egypt, China, and Greece.

It is perhaps bad form for a critic to discuss a particular book chapter by chapter. My departure from this rule is an exception simply because each of Pelikan's first eight chapters deals, powerfully and originally, with aspects of religion and culture that one finds hardly anywhere else. Still, I want to mention only one more chapter, the one centering on Jesus's earliest sacred title, "Son of Man," the title by which Jesus most often referred to himself. Pelikan turns his attention to this title late in the book, and astonishingly so. His topic is the gradual discovery of the mystery of human nature, as Christians were reflecting on the mystery of the incarnate word. Jesus had come into this world to save mankind. Logically speaking one would surmise that men were first conscious of their need for salvation, and this logical order is observed today in all Christian instruction. But it did not happen as such in history where the experience of Jesus came first and the awareness of man's sinfulness later: "Christian thought had to gauge the magnitude of the human crime by first taking the measure of the one on whom the divine punishment of the cross had been imposed and thus (shifting to the original metaphor of salvation as health) making the diagnosis fit the prescription" (72).

The full dimension of man's self-awareness did not come until Augustine's *Confessions*, written almost 400 years after Christ. "First Nicea had to determine what Jesus the Light *was* before Augustine could determine why He *had to be* what He was" (73). History has a parallel in the experience of every Christian who maintains a life of prayer and for whom the gradually deepening knowledge of Jesus Christ becomes the source of an equally deepening discovery of sin in his own life. Augustine himself had travelled this road and experienced this discovery. But if Augustine had left not only to Christians but to all of human culture the notion of sin, including original sin, he also had dwelt on the grandeur of humanity in "the face of Jesus Christ," the human image of

God. More than a thousand years after Augustine, Blaise Pascal, in his *Thoughts*, found terse words for this knowledge: "The knowledge of God without that of man's misery causes pride. The knowledge of man's misery without that of God causes despair. The knowledge of Jesus Christ constitutes the middle course, because in Him we find both God and our misery" (#426). "That a religion may be true, it must have knowledge of our nature. It ought to know its greatness and littleness, and the reasons of both" (#433).

The maxim "Know thyself" came to us from the Greeks, who claimed it as a divine revelation. In spite of Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, Epicurus, human self-knowledge had been neither profound nor accurate. Augustine's discovery of the depth of the human soul, in the presence of Jesus Christ, created a psychology which to this day is unsurpassed in scope and accuracy and which, empirically, deals with the universal condition of man. Pelikan demonstrates great sensitivity by placing his chapter on this problem late, among the first eight ones, centering it on Augustine's discoveries, not only in his *Confessions* but also in his *On the Trinity*. He might also have pointed to the very late date when this psychology created a literary form of self-expression in the psychological novel as climaxed in Fyodor Dostoevsky. One is tempted in fact to change Hegel's dictum about the owl of Minerva being a bird of the late evening into psychology being a creature of the late night, tardy in making its appearance, more tardy in finding a philosophical expression, and even more tardy in moving the artist's soul. As an example of the latter, Pelikan produces a reproduction of the powerful painting by Siegfried Reinhardt, called *Light*, which shows, in the front, a saxophonist and a person lost in self-centered dreams, and then behind them Christ, his face all-rousing appeal, his figure all light. "It is not only that in their self-indulgence they choose to ignore Jesus the light of the world," declares Pelikan. "Rather, it is his very appearing that, for the first time, reveals to them their true condition. Both

the misery and the grandeur have become visible through the coming of that light" (72).

The sacred titles of Jesus have provided Pelikan with the themes of his first eight chapters, which compose one half of the book. In the second half the chapters receive their topical unity from various cultural results of the image of Jesus, so that the images of Jesus he describes are not always born from a deep spiritual experience of adoration. Even though Pelikan orders these chapters mostly in chronological sequence of "ages"—the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, the twentieth century—he deals with cultural phenomena more widely spread than the limits of these ages. In his chapter on the Renaissance his central figure is Erasmus, the creator of "Sacred Philology." But Pelikan also includes in this chapter both Dante and El Greco, neither of whom would normally be counted as being within the Renaissance. One expects of a Lutheran professor of church history a strong chapter on the Reformation, and one is not disappointed. Still, the chapter is cultural rather than church history and extends its coverage to the eighteenth century, the time of Johann Sebastian Bach, "the fifth evangelist." A chapter on Christian pacifism appears to deal with the seventeenth century but also ranges considerably further in time. "The Teacher of Common Sense," a title often applied to Jesus in the Enlightenment, illustrates the way in which such titles not only reflect the dogma about Jesus Christ, but also reduce the image of Jesus to the "spirit of the time" (Hegel's *Zeitgeist*), thereby pulling divine transcendence into mundane immanence. In his last chapters, Pelikan gives other examples or varieties of the same endeavor, e.g., Jesus as "the bard of the Holy Ghost" (Emerson), as "the Liberator" of contemporary liberation ideologies, and as a world figure beyond the frontiers of Christendom.

One must wonder whether, in order to write these chapters, Pelikan had to manipulate his portrait of particular ages

to fit an image of Jesus that he could find in some of the cultural manifestations. For instance, Pelikan uses the Renaissance term *uomo universale* (universal man) as meant to apply to Jesus Christ. There is no question that Jesus not only is a universal man, but in a strict sense *the* universal man, and has thus figured both in dogmatic and generally cultural thinking about him. All the same, the Italian Renaissance coined this symbol to characterize the likes of Leon Battista Alberti, Michelangelo Buonarroti, and Leonardo da Vinci, and when we now speak of "Renaissance Man," we really mean a *uomo universale* in the fifteenth-century sense. If Pelikan ignores this specific meaning of the term in order to concentrate only on the meaning that applies to Jesus, he does justice to Jesus but injustice to the Renaissance. The same kind of distortion is found in Pelikan's report on the Enlightenment with its insistence on Jesus as "the teacher of common sense." There is no denying that the term is used during the Enlightenment, but there also can be no denying that Enlightenment deism emphatically centers on an absentee God without Jesus, and if it centers in turn on Jesus, then it is Jesus without the Cross and the Resurrection. One might even say that in the eighteenth century Zeus and the Olympians were more frequently thought of than Jesus. Something like this needs to be pointed out in order to avoid the impression that the reality of the eighteenth century is still the same as in the thirteenth, only with a slightly different image of Jesus.

More important is the question of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We need to be aware of the Christian component in the message of salvation proclaimed by Marx. But by this time "the human mind left to itself," first postulated by Voltaire, has fully blossomed into a rebellious doctrine. Marx's savior is a Promethean figure, the revolutionary proletariat, and salvation is by way of revolutionary violence rather than a sacrificial death on the cross. On the one hand we can see that ours, a Christian civilization,

cannot endure without faith in salvation, that is to say, in some kind of salvation. On the other hand, we find the message of salvation linked to Jesus Christ perverted into its very opposite and claimed by rebellious man as his own work. Again, we are no longer in the same reality in which a mankind composed of sinful persons can count on "the means of grace" and entertain "the hope of glory." Rather, the entire doctrine of reality, and not just the conduct of single persons, has been turned against the divine Savior. The Bible has names for this phenomenon. Jesus called it the "unforgivable" sin against the Holy Spirit; and the letters of John speak of "the Antichrist," a political and not a private figure. My remarks here may appear to some severely critical, even impermissibly critical of ideas that are widely held. But in an age that suffers from "spiritual disease" (Schelling's *pneumopathology*) sane persons need this kind of criticism in order to maintain a modicum of order. Pelikan's pages concerning the last two or three centuries are devoid of any trace of critical description of the modern *Zeitgeist*. Does he believe that the continuing image of Jesus, in some radically reduced form, will produce its own critique of the age? Will the fashioning of images of Jesus from the stuff of a rebellious world be sufficient to heal our spiritual disease? Be that as it may, one cannot read the second half of this book, particularly the last four chapters, without a sense of drifting, so different from the firm footing provided by the first half.

But such complaints must remain strictly marginal since this is a book that raises broad questions of cultural morphology. Pelikan has demonstrated that the form we call culture issues from great spiritual impulses and experiences. Like Spengler he has shown that a cultural form, once having taken shape, will abide even when a culture seems to have turned its back on the initial impulse. Unlike Spengler he is not committed to looking on cultures as monads or organic unities. The enduring impulse of the spiritual beginning will be able to spread beyond a specific culture by

the agency of secondary impulses resulting from it. Pelikan has opened for us ways of looking at ourselves—our form of existence—in ways which may not be entirely new but to which we have by now long been unaccustomed. Many may regard this entire topic as distasteful, but even they, and indeed all of us, will sooner or later acknowledge our gratefulness to Jaroslav Pelikan.

¹*Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, 1985). All page references are included in the text. ²*Cf.* Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, translated and edited by Gerhart Niemeyer (Notre Dame, 1978), chapter 6, "Reason — The Classic Experience." ³The Free Press, 1967, p. 12. ⁴Stanley L. Jaki, *Science and Creation* (Scottish Academic Press, 1974), p. 237.