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## The Choir of History II

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**Abstract:** *In the first part of this article<sup>1</sup> a few basic observations were made regarding the wider question of the nature of historical research, using Edward Carr<sup>2</sup> as a point of departure, as well as the basic impact of some of his key observations in conversation with the somewhat new, relatively, field of historical theology. This topic is not only relevant, as will be argued below, but is also very urgent as the founding of a new cathedra of historical theology at Sofia University “Sv. Kliment Ohridski”’s Theological Faculty has proved. The main line of academic succession that was proposed links N. Glubokovski, V. Bolotov, A. Lebedev, Fr. G. Florovsky and J. Pelikan. The connection between all five has been sketched out already but the link between the last two is much more direct and is a crucial guide into the modern idea of historical theology, understood and misunderstood.*

**Key words:** *Pelikan, Florovsky, neo-patristic synthesis, historical theology, church history, history of theology*

### I

Father Georges V. Florovsky (1893 – 1979) needs no introduction. His life is well documented<sup>3</sup>, and his ideas have been the focus of considerable attention, both from Orthodox and other circles. A significant portion of the research on him has focused on what he termed the “neo-patristic synthesis”<sup>4</sup>. His positions on historical research have been less discussed, with few notable exceptions<sup>5</sup>. It is within that latter framework that Fr. Florovsky worked as co-chairman on the specially formed theological working group on “Tradition and traditions”, which was organized with the aim to provide a deeper understanding of the topic before the Second Assembly of the WCC at Evanston (1954)<sup>6</sup>. Along with Albert C. Outler they formed the working group after the initial report prepared by Fr. Florovsky revealed that the question goes much deeper and further, and broader research is necessary.

Within the next few years several members of said working group become the leading voices, Jaroslav Pelikan (1923 – 2006) being the most obvious example,

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<sup>1</sup> Avramov, T. „The Choir of History I“. *Astra Salvensis*, XX:1, ????,.,.,.

<sup>2</sup> E. H. Carr, *What is History?*, Vintage Books, New York, 1961

<sup>3</sup> Blane, Pavlov, et. Al.

<sup>4</sup> Neo-patristic. Behr et. Al.

<sup>5</sup> Discussions of Florovsky.

<sup>6</sup> Commission on Faith and Order. Minutes of meeting held at the Château de Bossey, 1953, (Faith and Order Commission Papers No. 17). p. 31.

at the time a young academic, teaching at the Chicago University. His report<sup>7</sup>, which was unanimously chosen as the report of the entire working group, engages the topic in a nuanced and yet very direct way. Writing from a Lutheran background, and ecclesial affiliation, Pelikan focuses on certain points that, at best, can be described as a direct redaction of the basic principles of *sola scriptura*<sup>8</sup> - his answer: *scriptura nunquam sola*.<sup>9</sup> This may seem strange but within the context of the working group Pelikan was caught between the verbal sparring of Fr. Florovsky and Wilhelm Pauck, his mentor since his time as a doctoral student at Chicago University. It is from one of Fr. Florovsky's remarks that the aforementioned report draws its inspiration and also marks a turning point for Pelikan himself, as after that moment he changes, or goes back to, the chronological direction of his research.<sup>10</sup> This can be demonstrated only retrospectively as Pelikan recalls this story some 50 years later.<sup>11</sup>

Within one of its regular meetings, most likely the one held at New Haven in 1957<sup>12</sup> the working group on Tradition and traditions invited other church affiliated people to participate in an open discussion on the definition of Tradition in order to expand the scope of the research. One of the participants was a Baptist pastor from one of the Southern States who, after listening and thinking for some time finally spoke up, confessing that he feels his presence there as not entirely honest as “we simply do not have Tradition, we have the Bible”<sup>13</sup>. What followed was a series of questions, posed to the pastor from Fr. Florovsky, pushing the former to come to terms with the fact that the Lord's Supper and the words of institution therein do not find their literal commission within the Bible. At the end Fr. Florovsky concludes with “My friend, the only

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<sup>7</sup> Pelikan, J. „Overcoming History by History“. – In: Lampe, G. H. *The Old and the New in the Church: Studies in Ministry and Worship of the World Council of Churches*, London: SCM Press, 1961, 36–42. This report is initially sent to both Outler and Fr. Florovsky in its initial form in 1957. Cf. Letter, 25.01.1957 r. Jaroslav Pelikan Correspondence, Albert C. Outler Papers, Bridwell Library Special Collections, SMU, Box 1146B, Folder 1.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Pelikan, J. Op. cit. p. 40–42.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 38.

<sup>10</sup> During his time as both an undergraduate and PhD candidate at Concordia Seminary and Chicago University accordingly Pelikan's interests somewhat change from the history of the Eastern Slavic churches to the Czech reception of the Reformation.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Pelikan, J. *The Christian Tradition*. <https://digi.svots.edu/index.php/pelikan-jaroslav-jan> [21.07.2022]. Pelikan mentions this story in the presentation and lecture at the event held at St. Vladimir's Theological Seminary in 2003 for the publication of one of his last major works focused on the history of the creeds and confessions of the Christian Church. Cf. Pelikan, J., Hotchkins, V. (eds.) *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Traditions*, 3 Vols. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. The lecture itself can be accessed online at

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Commission on Faith and Order. Minutes: New Haven, Connecticut, 1957 (Faith and Order papers No. 25), p. 23-27.

<sup>13</sup> Pelikan, J. *The Christian Tradition*.

alternative to Tradition is bad tradition”<sup>14</sup>. This is on only an attack on the basic understanding of Tradition within the broader Baptist confessions, but also a reminder that the main guiding principle of the Church has always been the synthesis, expression, and dissemination of the formulations of faith in her liturgical life.

It is exactly this line of thought that is at the core of Pelikan’s report, and this shows not only that Fr. Florovsky, already at this point, has a strong influence, but also reveals one of the core guiding principles of Pelikan’s *magnum opus*<sup>15</sup>, the same liturgical principle, as having its genesis, within the author’s system, at a very early point, and from a specific ecclesial direction.

The link between Pelikan and Fr. Florovsky can be further exemplified with only a cursory glance at the former’s published works after his participation in the working group. Before this most of his work, both in the classroom and without, is on the history of the Reformation and Luther specifically.<sup>16</sup> Afterwards, although not immediately, he starts shifting his focus on the history of thought in the early Church in a manner, at least methodologically, reminiscent of Fr. Florovsky’s approach to patristics.<sup>17</sup> As more time passes Pelikan focuses more and more on this period and with the same methodology but for our purposes here this initial period is enough to give a basic idea of the continuation and reception between him and Fr. Florovsky. This also opens up the opportunity to

<sup>14</sup> Pelikan, J. *The Christian Tradition*.

<sup>15</sup> Pelikan, J. *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Vols. 1-5. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971-1989.

<sup>16</sup> Just a few of them are: Pelikan, J. „The Relation of Faith and Knowledge in the Lutheran Confessions“. *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 21 (1950), 321–331; Pelikan, J. „Theology and Missions in Lutheran History“. – In: *Proceedings of the Thirtieth Convention of the Atlantic District of the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House (1951), 33–38; Pelikan, J. „Doctrine of Creation in Lutheran Confessional Theology“. *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 26 (1955): 569–579; Pelikan, J. „Luther’s Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper“. *Proceedings of the Thirtieth Convention of the English District of the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957, 12–33.

<sup>17</sup> Good examples are: Pelikan, J. *The Shape of Death: Life, Death, and Immortality in the Early Fathers*. New York: Abingdon Press, 1961; Pelikan, J. *The Light of the World: A Basic Image in Early Christian Thought*. New York: Harper, 1962; Pelikan, J. „Fathers, Brethren and Distant Relatives“. *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 33:12, p. 710–718; Pelikan, J. „Morality of God and the Immortality of Man in Gregory of Nyssa“. – In: Hefner, P. (ed.). *Scope of Grace: Essays in Honor of Joseph Sittler*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964. 79–97; Pelikan, J. „Thine Alabaster Cities Gleam – The Secularization of a Vision“. *A.I.A. Journal*, 42:2 (1964), 37–43; Pelikan, J. *The Finality of Jesus Christ in An Age of Universal History: A Dilemma of the Third Century*. *Ecumenical Studies in History*, 3. London: Lutterworth, 1965; Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965; Chrysostom, John. (Pelikan, J. ed. and trans.) *The Preaching of Chrysostom: Homilies on the Sermon on the Mount*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967; Pelikan, J. „Past of Belief: Reflections of a Historian of Doctrine“. – In: Baum, G. (ed.). *The Future of Belief Debate*. New York: Herder & Herder, 1967, 29–36.

return to the main topic, the nature and task of historical theology, and to contextualize it with some other approaches that differ from Pelikan's.

## II

As a discipline historical theology is remarkably fluent. It is also one that seems to have different connotations dependent on the linguistic and cultural context. Within the Slavic languages, specifically Bulgarian, the basic understanding is that it is a superstructure, gathering within itself all historical disciplines (Church History, history of Christian thought, history of theology, and others) but that it also exists as a separate methodological approach to interpret various sources and fragments not only abstractly and concretely but within the ecclesial background of the practitioner. Formulated in this way it would be acceptable to equate historical theology to just plain history of the Church.

McGrath, in a way that seems to be representative of the anglophone world, describes it as a separate discipline that is the intersection between history, philosophy and systematic theology, but also one that follows the basic form of Harnack's *Dogmengeschichte*: „Historical theology is the branch of theological inquiry which aims to explore the historical development of Christian doctrines, and identify the factors which were influential in their formulation and adoption.”<sup>18</sup> Bearing in mind that the work just cited is of an introductory nature McGrath does point out on several occasions the underlying link between the fields mentioned above.<sup>19</sup> He also emphasizes the therapeutic nature of historical theology to the delusions of the present, especially when it comes to newer trends in theology.<sup>20</sup> But a brief look at his prolific publishing history is enough to show that while this is a magnificently structured and well written work it is still an introduction and one among many.

Jaroslav Pelikan, on the other hand, has spent almost the entirety of his life working in the field. His observations, then, can give a subtly more nuanced understanding of it, as well as guide us forward. Although there are numerous examples throughout his works only a few will be drawn together here. One of the more obvious choices is his volume bearing the same title that these series of articles aim to address. In it he draws a brief historiographical sketch of the different understandings of historical theology, tracing not only the field itself, but also juxtaposing it with the history of theology, history of dogma and theological history<sup>21</sup>. He chooses to define historical theology as the specific task of studying the doctrines, not dogmas only, of the Church. This would initially seem to coincide with McGrath's understanding but the volume just mentioned

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<sup>18</sup> McGrath, A. *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, 1998, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p. 12, 15-17.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 14.

<sup>21</sup> Pelikan, J. *Historical Theology: Continuity and Change in Christian Doctrine*. New York: Corpus Books; London: Hutchinson, 1971, p. 3-17.

was published at the same time as the publication of the first of five volumes of Pelikan's *magnum opus* – The Christian Tradition<sup>22</sup> and serves as an *apologia* of methodology. The Christian Tradition, though following in the *Dogmengeschichte* tradition is much more than an authoritative history of the teaching of the Church, though not less. In all of his works Pelikan defines doctrine as “that which the Church believes, teaches, and confesses”<sup>23</sup>. That definition has been worked out and expanded upon in various works but it also discloses an approach that stems from his mentor, Fr. Florovsky, and one that presupposes a specific way of looking at not only the teaching but also the history of the Church. Again, Florovsky's views are well known and will not be repeated here.<sup>24</sup>

The correspondence between Pelikan and Fr. Florovsky reveals an aspect of the former's work that does not seem to have been highlighted very often. While the *belief* and *teaching* sides of the citation above are somewhat self-explanatory the *confessing* one is two-sided and rooted in a deeper understanding that overturns the dominating character that Harnack's work had on the field, itself inheriting key points in the German Liberal theology of the time. That overturning is one of the most notable characteristics of Pelikan's work and is, simply put, a restatement of the authoritative character of the liturgical life of the Church in her formulation, and defense, of doctrine. And it is this aspect that seems to be borrowed and learned from Fr. Florovsky.

In a later piece of correspondence between the two Pelikan credits Fr. Florovsky with the framework and development of the first volume<sup>25</sup> and it is within it that he implements the liturgical argument for the defense of doctrine. The second volume, published during a time of intense administrative work but coming out at almost a blank spot within Pelikan's publication history, focuses on the history of doctrine and tradition in the Christian East. It is within its pages that Harnack's idea of the fundamental disassociation between Christianity and the Church is rejected and turned on its head.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Pelikan, J. *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 5 Vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971-1989.

<sup>23</sup> Pelikan, J. *Historical Theology*, p. 21; More expounded in pp. 68-99; Pelikan, J. *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Vol. 1: *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971, p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Павлов, П. *Богословието като биография : Протоиерей Георги Флоровски (1893-1979)*. Био-библиография. София: УИ „Св. Климент Охридски, 2013; Павлов, П. *Нова та софиология: естетика срещу история (Богословие и философия)*, Протоиерей Георги Флоровски (1893-1979) : In *Мемориум*. Сборник с доклади от Годината на Флоровски, София, 2012, p. 231-249.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Jaroslav Pelikan, May 11, 1967. *Georges Florovsky Papers*, C0586, Manuscripts Division, Department of Special Collections, Princeton University Library

<sup>26</sup> Pelikan, J. *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Vol. 2: *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600–1700)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974, p. 34-78; 118-156.

While Pelikan’s genius and incredible ability to navigate the foreign land of the past is without parallel Florovsky’s inspiration is again evident. Although it is not within the aim, nor scope, of this article to prove so, his neo-patristic synthesis finds one of its fullest expressions in Pelikan’s work and is developed in a way that holds true to the basic principles of the school of historical research that Florovsky inherited, one that does use the name of historical theology for itself. The key differentiating feature of Pelikan’s work is an ability to allow enough space for heterodox ideas not only from a polemical point of view, but in order to show how they fall apart from within, often because they are held by people, who prayed and worshiped in the same way that their orthodox peers did. This generosity and ability to hear the voices extends beyond just the key figures, but also lends an ear to the voice(s) of the Church, singing in harmony sometimes, at others - allowing for a dissonant key to guide the theme to the next major development and thus forming not just a solo concerto that we are now to listen to and repeat, but a choir and a symphony that provokes understanding and learning.

It is this understanding that is fundamental to the Bulgarian practice, teaching, and research into historical theology. The matter may seem plainly organizational at first, just one of the possible ways to organize an institution of higher learning with a rich history, but also reflects the approach taken therein to the Christian past in general. In this way historical theology becomes a substructure, a hypothesis that underlines and guides all research into the past, whether it be the connected or not to the Church. This aims to address one of the key problems with teaching church history – approaching it as just any other history. Intertwined as it is with a fundamental Christological point of view it becomes a guide through the past, but also the future, that etches a key Event and juxtaposes all with it.

### III

This way of approaching historical theology may seem to make it strictly and ecclesial endeavor. While this could be argued the opposite is much truer. Able to listen, and join in, the choir of history one is then able to approach contemporary issues not blinded by their own prejudices of which we all lay captive, whether we tend to ignore this or not, but sing anew a melody once sung in a new key, with a different backdrop and thus – sing anew.

This is also a way that allows for the interdisciplinary work that is so necessary today - a bridge between all the humanities in a time that does not seem to put too much energy into the general education and preparation of individuals for fields other than those directly related to the work they will, or would like to, do. The methodology is evident but the task at hand is its implementation and use. In the words of Pelikan’s favorite quote from Faust: “What you have as heritage, now take as task, for thus you will make it your own.”