ARTICLES

On the Development of Doctrine: Reactions to Jaroslav Pelican[1]

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Since the era of Eusebius, Christian theologians and historians have concerned themselves with the teachings of their predecessors. Eusebius argued that change and novelty involved heresy since doctrine was true eternally. Augustine, however, voided this definition. In his writings which generated the Pelagian controversy, Augustine argued against what had been the traditional recognition of the Fathers of the free will of man and his moral responsibility, much in the manner of the pagan philosophers and Manicheans. Because of the overreaction of Pelagius, Augustine carried the day and, to the amazement of St. Vincent of Lerins and the Oriental Divines, achieved a verdict which placed the onus of change on the Pelagian doctrines.

The issue of change in doctrine became an important issue in the reformation era as both reformers and churchmen sought to use history as a weapon for their alternative. This phenomenon is most vividly illustrated in the *Centuries of Magdeburg* (Protestant) and the *Annales* of Baronius (Catholic).

Despite the frequent use of doctrinal history in apologetic and polemic, the history of Christian doctrine is a discipline with a short history dominated by the work of Adolf von Harnack's *History of Dogma*. Harnack, as Pelican observes, used the term dogma in a very restrictive sense. There were two dogmas, the dogma of the Trinity and the dogma of the Person (two natures doctrine) of Christ as these were defined by the first four (or seven) ecumenical councils. This dogma was the result of Hellenization; that is, the giving of metaphysical significance to the life of a person who appeared in time and space, and of ecclesiasticalization; that is, the interposition of the church's tradition between the individual and personal experience of salvation.

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Pelican perceives his work as a corrective critique of Harnack. *Historical Theology* is a work "in conversation with Harnack" (p. ciii). He also formulated the description of his task as a historian of the development of doctrine in contradistinction to that of Harnack:[2]

> To find a substitute for Harnack's definition of the history of doctrine as history of dogma, it is necessary to define doctrine in a manner that is simultaneously more comprehensive and more restrictive: more comprehensive in that the polemical and juridical expressions of doctrine in the form of dogmatic decrees and promulgations are not isolated from other expressions of doctrine, such as preaching, instruction, exegesis, liturgy, and spirituality; more restrictive in that the range and content of the doctrines considered are not determined in the first place by the quarrels among theologians but by the development of those doctrines themselves. Christian doctrine, then, may be defined as what the Church believes, teaches, and confesses on the basis of the word of God.

This is the method for his expositions of Christian doctrine, "What the church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches and confesses on the basis of the word of God."[3] He seeks to clarify this definition:[4]

> Without setting rigid boundaries, we shall identify what is "believed" as the form of Christian doctrine present in the modalities of devotion, spirituality, and worship; what is "taught" as the content of the word of God extracted by exegesis from the witness of the Bible and communicated to the people of the church through proclamation, instruction, and churchly theology; and what is "confessed" as the testimony of the church, both against false teaching from within and against attacks from without, articulated in polemics and in apologetics, in creed and in dogma. Creeds and decrees against heresy will bulk large in our documentation, as they do in that of the histories of dogma; for what the church confesses is what the church has believed and taught—or at least part of what the church has believed and taught. In the history of dogma, what the church believes and teaches apart from its normative statements of faith is important as a commentary on creed and dogma. In the present history of the development of doctrine, the creed and dogma are important as an index to what the church believes, teaches, and confesses.

In the outworking of this programmatic in the first two volumes of *The Christian Tradition, A History of the Development of Doctrine,* the most important words of the formulary become the recurring terms, "what" and "church". The emphasis is upon the **what** the **church** (broadly defined, emphasizing its unity in language and conceptual structures) believes, teaches and confesses. There is little attempt to go beyond a description to an analysis of **why** a doctrine developed as he has ably narrated that development toward becoming, "part of the authorized deposit of the faith."[5]

My reaction to Jaroslav Pelican's historiography can be formulated in a series of questions. First, how can one write a history of the development of doctrine without a careful investigation of Hellenistic and apocalyptic thought forms, the pagan and Judaic formulations of faith and philosophical investigations and without a consideration of the cultural, social and political contexts out of which individuals have sought to express the faith of the Church catholic? Expressions of hope and belief are never formulated in a vacuum. There are the static records of much debate, of intense feeling, of personalities in conflict and of words in cultural structures. Pelican oversimplifies the process of historical investigation; for, if an understanding of the past is to be achieved, we must ask the functional and contectual meaning of specific historical datum, which by analogy interacts with our own present. Thus, historical confrontation is more than description.

Second, can it be assumed that a word or construct represents the same symbolized structure for succeeding generations? Words are ambiguous in any context and usually draw upon several heritages.[6] They conceal aspects of any action as well as record and reveal. Only on the basis of extensive contextualization can sweeping generalizations of genetic continuity be promulgated.

Third, is sufficient attention given in Pelican's historiography to the problem of cultural mutation? Man has remained basically the same physiologically throughout his history. However the ordeal of change heightens or lowers technical proficiency, historical, social and cultural awareness and consciousness. Each is the product of a matix of experiences quite unlike that of any other age. By analogy, we interact with the past from which we "inherited" our existential structures. This makes all the more imperative our investigation of the "why" along with the "what."

These questions which have been directed to Pelican are perhaps indicative of wherein may lie his greatest contribution; that is, not in his description, but rather in forcing historians and theologians to care-

fully and critically investigate their historiography. In this quest for an
adequate hermeneutic for historical data, his *Historical Theology* will
be a necessary starting point, along with the work of Harnack, J.H.
Newman and Collingwood, beyond whom he has insisted we must go
in our programmatics of historical analysis.

FOOTNOTES

1. Jaroslav Pelican is the Titus Street Professor of Ecclesiastical
History at Yale University. This editorial essay is concerned primarily
with his *The Christian Tradition, A History of the Development of
Doctrine,* the first two volumes of which, *The Emergence of the
Catholic Tradition* (100-600), (Chicago and London: The University
of Chicago Press, 1971) and *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom* (600-
1700) (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974)
have attracted much attention. These are to be understood as outwork-
ings of his historiography expressed in *Historical Theology,* Continuity
and Change in Christian Doctrine (New York: Corpus, 1971) and
Development of Christian Doctrine, Some Historical Prolegomena (New
Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969).

2. *Historical Theology, op. cit.,* p. 95.

3. *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (100-600), *op. cit.,*
p. 1.

4. *Ibid.,* p. 4.

5. *Ibid.,* p. 5.

6. Exemplary of this problem is Wesley's adaptation of the term
"perfect." A significant portion of his writing is an attempt to clarify
what was meant by "perfect." This linguistic dilemma continues to
haunt the Holiness Movement.