

Believe it or not

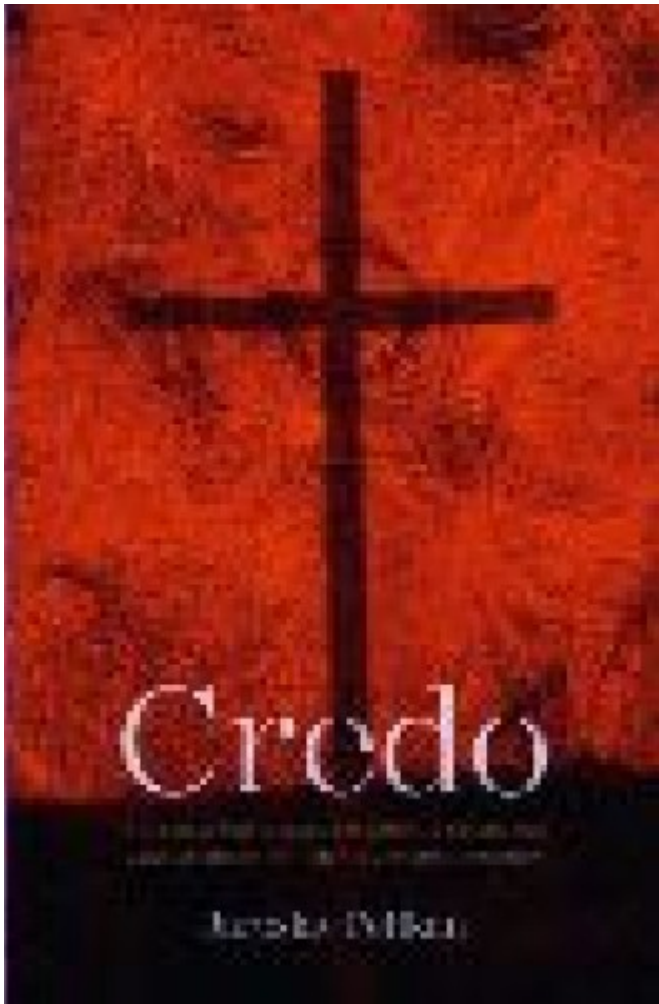
By [William C. Placher](#) in the [September 20, 2003](#) issue

In Review



Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition

Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds.
Yale University Press



Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition

Jaroslav Pelikan
Yale University Press

Just a few months before his 80th birthday, Jaroslav Pelikan has published yet another major project—editing, in collaboration with Valerie Hotchkiss, a collection of the creeds and confessions of the Christian tradition from its beginnings up through the Lutheran–Roman Catholic 1999 joint declaration on the doctrine of justification. This is a monumental and marvelous work of scholarship, the worthy successor to Philip Schaff’s *Creeds of Christendom*, published 125 years ago.

Given the price, I can’t honestly urge every reader to rush out and buy a set, but get a library near you to buy it and spend some time reading and looking through it. Hope for a paperback edition. The books are physically beautiful, and the

introductions, bibliographies and indexes are models of their kind. The creeds lead from the first fragments confessing the faith of early Christians through the ecumenical councils, the doctrinal debates of both East and West in the Middle Ages, the vast multiplicity of Reformation confessions and catechisms, down to contemporary statements from new denominations, the Third World and ecumenical discussions.

Some texts are here translated into English for the first time. The accompanying CD ROM provides all the non-English texts in their original languages. (Techies might dream of a CD ROM that included translations and a search capacity, but the fine indexes will help in tracking down almost anything a reader needs.) The set of books comes with endorsements on the back cover from nearly everybody but God, who, I suppose, stopped endorsing new books some time ago.

Scholars will consult these volumes to answer all sorts of particular questions; interested readers should find just thumbing through them endlessly fascinating. To pick some random examples: In the 12th century, Peter Abelard, after a life of tragedy and tribulation, concludes his account of his own faith by saying, "The storm may rage but I am unshaken, though the winds may blow they leave me unmoved; for the rock of my foundation stands firm." The Masai Creed, written about 1960 (the introduction here oddly puts the Masai in Nigeria, on the wrong side of Africa), summarizes Christology like this: "We believe that God made good his promise by sending his Son, Jesus Christ, a man in the flesh, a Jew by tribe, born poor in a little village, who left his home and was always on safari, doing good, curing people by the power of God, teaching about God and man, showing that the meaning of religion is love." The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, meeting in 1996, declares: "The loss of God's centrality in the life of today's church is common and lamentable. It is this loss that allows us to transform worship into entertainment, gospel preaching into marketing, believing into technique, being good into feeling good about ourselves, and faithfulness into being successful." In every case, there is an unexpected phrase to inspire or set a reader thinking.

No collection of Christian creeds and confessions can be complete. As Pelikan points out, the confessional texts from just the one German province of Franconia in the decade between 1520 and 1530 add up to more than 500 pages. Other books, therefore, include documents not to be found here. For instance, Lukas Vischer's 1982 *Reformed Witness Today* has a wider selection of recent Reformed confessions from around the world than appears here. J. Gordon Melton's 1988 *Encyclopedia of*

American Religions: Religious Creeds remains the best resource for finding out the beliefs of some American denominations you've never heard of. But for the whole sweep of the world over 2,000 years, Pelikan and Hotchkiss have produced what will be the standard work for decades to come.

Pelikan's introductory first volume, *Credo*, comes as part of the set but can be purchased separately. It may be significant that Schaff took only eight pages to comment on the general topic of creeds and confessions before moving on to introductions of particular texts, while Pelikan takes 500 pages. As late as the 1870s when Schaff was writing, creeds were obviously important. Denominational identity mattered, and it was the beliefs set out in their confessional statements that centrally defined most denominations. Presbyterians believed in predestination; Methodists didn't. Catholics and Lutherans differed on the meaning of justification and the Eucharist. And so on. They brought their children up to know why those other folk were wrong.

At least in North America, times have radically changed. To the people on the left (to use admittedly problematic categories), doing good and being "sincere" often appear more important than believing correctly, and even the thought of condemning anyone for heresy seems embarrassing. As Pelikan observes, many in this age feel "that even if the time for faith as such may not have passed, the time for teaching Christian faith as authoritative dogma probably has, and the time for confessing it in a normative creedal formulary certainly has." On the right, many of those who think themselves most concerned about maintaining every jot and tittle of Christian orthodoxy see little reason to look beyond the Bible itself for instruction. The whole history of creeds and confessions is veiled by evangelical amnesia. And in the broad middle, people are more apt to choose their congregation because of its congenial music or strong youth program than because of the particular set of beliefs it confesses. Even scholars of Christian history often conclude that political and social conflicts really have been more important than doctrinal debates.

Pelikan's *Credo* thus becomes a defense not only of the volumes it introduces—why bother to gather all these creeds and confessions in a time when they seem not to matter much anymore?—but also of his whole remarkable career, dedicated as it has been to the study of what Christians down the centuries have believed, taught and confessed. He writes, as always, with magisterial command of all possible sources in all known languages and a gift for the occasional elegant epigram derived in part, I suspect, from a lifetime of reading Edward Gibbon for fun.

Confessions arise, he argues, from exegesis, prayer, polemics and politics. Those who read the Bible seriously (as opposed to those content to memorize a dozen or so all-purpose proof texts) will find themselves puzzling over how to reconcile James and Paul on the relation between works and faith, John 10:30 (“I and the Father are one”) and John 14:28 (“the Father is greater than I”) and a host of other apparently conflicting passages. Figure out how to put such pieces together in a coherent whole, and you are doing theology; suggest the answer you figured out to your fellow Christians, and you are proposing doctrine; write down what you and they agree on, and you have produced a confession. Similarly, in private prayer and public liturgy, Christians turn to God and need to figure out how they should properly address God. Thus reflection on prayer, like exegesis, leads toward doctrine.

So do polemics and politics. “Wherever there is a creed,” Alfred North Whitehead once remarked, “there is a heretic round the corner or in his grave.” Pelikan doesn’t quite agree—he cites the Apostles’ Creed, for instance, as having emerged from baptismal confessions without a primary focus on any particular heresy—but he does readily concede that polemics against heresies are an important reason for the emergence of confessional statements. Finally, he admits, politics also plays its role. He quotes the title of a book by the Dutch scholar H. M. Kuitert: *Everything Is Politics but Politics Is Not Everything*. No creed or confession has been written without political influences at work, but Pelikan maintains that the meaning or importance of any significant creed cannot be reduced purely to its political implications.

It is now fashionable to argue that creeds should be less important than deeds and piety, and that formal confessions impose the will of the elite on ordinary folk. In response to the first claim, Pelikan quotes Lionel Trilling: “It is probably true that when the dogmatic principle in religion is slighted, religion goes along for a while on generalized emotion and ethical intention—‘morality touched by emotion,’” but it “then loses the force of its impulse and even the essence of its being.” Even if I have a warm personal relationship with Jesus, I also need an account of what’s so special about Jesus to understand why my relationship with him is so important. If I think about dedicating my life to following him, I need an idea about why he’s worth following. Without such accounts and ideas, Christian feeling and Christian behavior start to fade to generalized warm fuzziness and social conventions.

As to the claim that creeds impose the will of the elite, Pelikan points out cases—most notably the opposition to Arianism in the century or so after the Council of Nicaea—in which, in John Henry Newman’s words, “The Catholic people, in the

length and breadth of Christendom, were the obstinate champions of Catholic truth, and the bishops were not.” Sometimes the masses fight for their creeds against the elite. Moreover, as Christianity has spread around the world, it is often a new confession that expresses the faith of Third World peoples in their own distinctive languages in contrast to the languages and categories of their colonizers.

It is easy to be cynical about confessions when confessing carries no danger. The term “confessor,” it is worth remembering, originally referred to those in the early church who had been arrested and tortured for their faith, though not (like martyrs) actually killed. We may now treat the confession of faith so casually because it comes so easily. We perhaps have become too comfortable in various ways to take confessions seriously enough.

Belief in resurrection, historians tell us, emerged in ancient Judaism only when disaster followed disaster and Jews could no longer feel confident that their memory and legacy would be preserved in the life of their own descendents in particular and the Jewish people in general. Then and now, those who lead rich and rewarding lives in this world may be able to reconcile themselves to agnosticism about life after death. Similarly, those who feel relatively satisfied with themselves may not feel the need of an objective atonement. Comforting metaphors suffice.

Those who are suffering starvation and oppression or know themselves to be sinners, on the other hand, want truth, not just metaphors. Do the injustices of this world constitute the last word on how things are? Do sinners really have hope of redemption? Is there some meaning to this apparently chaotic universe? Is Christian faith incompatible with the views of Hitler and his minions, and are the differences worth dying for? Creeds and confessions offer answers to such questions: Here, people say, is what we believe to be the truth about things that matter ultimately.

What might be the short-term future for confessions in American mainline Protestantism? Let me speculate just a bit. Most of the really nasty ecclesial debates in the U.S. these days—on the role of women, homosexuality, evolution and so on—center explicitly or implicitly on how we interpret the Bible. Could we be helped in settling such debates by confessional statements? My own guess is that simply addressing the controversial issues of the moment will not be of much use. We need to dig deeper. Perhaps even across denominational lines, those of us on the center left need to articulate how the Bible still functions for us as a religious authority, indeed as the word of God. Those on the center right need to explain the

interpretive rules which seem to lead them to different conclusions on some issues (divorce, the role of women in the church) than on others (homosexuality, salvation for non-Christians). Whether or not such statements would ever have confessional status, Pelikan's collection of texts reminds us how helpful the clear statement of a position can be in the life of the church. Whether Christians find a compromise or force a choice, they are at least talking clearly about the real issues.

These volumes contain interesting resources for such a project. The Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei verbum*, reminds Catholics of the need to attend to the literary genres of scripture, since truth is presented and expressed differently in historical, prophetic or poetic texts, or in other styles of speech. The interpreter has to look for that meaning which a biblical writer intended and expressed in his particular circumstances, and in his historical and cultural context, by means of such literary genres as were in use at his time. To understand correctly what a biblical writer intended to assert, due attention is needed both to the customary and characteristic ways of feeling, speaking and storytelling which were current in his time, and to the social conventions of the period.

The Confession of 1967, part of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s Book of Confessions, argues,

The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding. As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that he will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture.

In our current debates, we may need to move a step or two toward greater specificity. What do such claims mean for how scripture functions authoritatively in our faith and life?

As both the documents here collected and Pelikan's introduction to them remind us, creeds and confessions can function either to establish a consensus or to make clear lines of disagreement. In many mainline Protestant denominations, if the next

generation does not find a way of establishing consensus, it may be necessary to draw dividing lines. Either way, we may well be thinking a great deal in the coming decades about the form and function of creeds and confessions of faith. No resource will be more valuable to that thinking, and to much other thinking important to the life of the church, than these volumes. By presenting a collection worldwide and 20 centuries long in scope, they also remind us of the often parochial character of our own debates and the church's enduring ability to continue confessing faithfully through crises much greater than our own.