

The Need for Creeds

TRANSCRIPT

Broadcast Date: May 18, 2006

KRISTA TIPPETT, HOST: I'm Krista Tippett. Today, a monumental religious scholar of our time, Jaroslav Pelikan, who died last week. I interviewed him in his 80th year about the origins of Christian doctrine, in particular, the creeds. Pelikan knew that creeds are difficult for modern people and yet he insisted human beings will always need them.

DR. JAROSLAV PELIKAN: The singing of the creed is a very important and cherished way of indicating a universality of the faith across not only space but time. To know that in the Philippines this morning, this was the creed that was recited and to know that the Emperor Justinian in the sixth century and my late father and grandfather all affirmed this, all of us together.

MS. TIPPETT: This is *Speaking of Faith*. Stay with us. I'm Krista Tippett.

Every field of human endeavor has its heroes, men and women who may be relatively unknown in the wider culture but are living legends in the worlds of their accomplishment. Jaroslav Pelikan, who died last week, was one of those. He devoted his life of scholarship to exploring the vitality of ancient theology and creeds. He insisted that even modern pluralists need strong statements of belief. This hour we'll revisit my 2003 conversation with him, then, in his 80th year. He had just released an historic collection of Christian creeds from biblical times to the present and from across the globe. It has already become the standard resource for the coming century.

From American Public Media, this is *Speaking of Faith*, public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics and ideas. Today, "The Need for Creeds."

[Announcements]

MS. TIPPETT: Jaroslav Pelikan was a professor of history at Yale University for over four decades and a past president of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Among his many books, he wrote five epic volumes, the defining work of our time on Christian tradition, *A History of the Development of Doctrine*. Pelikan's gift was for clarifying the past for the sake of the present and the future. And, as he knew, the very idea of reciting an unchanging creed composed many centuries ago is troublesome for many modern Americans. I asked Jaroslav Pelikan how a fixed creed can be reconciled with an honest, intellectual faith which is surely not marked by static certainty. That, he told me, as we began our conversation, is precisely the point.

DR. PELIKAN: My faith life, like that of every one else, fluctuates. There are ups and downs and hot spots and cold spots, and boredom and ennui and all the rest can be there. And so I'm not asked on a Sunday morning, "As of 9:20, what do you believe?" And then you sit down with a three-by-five index card saying, "Now let's see. What do I believe today?" No, that's not what they're asking me. They're asking me, "Are you a member of a community which now, for a millennium and a half, has said, 'We believe in one God?'"

[Excerpts from *Christian creeds in foreign languages*]

MS. TIPPETT: *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* defines a creed as a brief authoritative formula of religious belief. The formulas we know as the principal creeds of the church were hundreds of years in the making, driven into being more by argument than by agreement. In the intellectual and religious ferment of the Greco-Roman world, various theologies and interpretations of the Gospel competed for credibility. The creeds were deemed necessary to codify the basic tenets and truths of this rapidly developing new religion. The Apostles' Creed, which is used principally at baptisms, answered the challenge of Gnosticism, which denied that Jesus was fully human. The Nicene Creed responded to the heresy of Arianism, which denied that Jesus was fully divine.

However abstract creedal statements might sound in modern ears, each line was the result of generations of impassioned debate, sometimes unto death. And each new line of each new creed of the past two millennia has been the result of more debate and compromise.

DR. PELIKAN: It is one of the differences between Christianity and the other major world religions that Christianity has spawned many creeds, as this set shows, thousands of pages of creeds.

MS. TIPPETT: How many creeds have you collected?

DR. PELIKAN: Well, we collected very nearly a thousand of them and cut it down to — I forget what the final box score is on that —

somewhere around 200, whereas to be Jewish is to affirm, every day if you're observant and with your dying breath if you can, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God. The Lord is one," the *Shema*, and that's really all the creed that Israel needs. So it's been possible to be Jewish now for these 3,000 or whatever years without publishing four volumes of creedal texts. "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His prophet"...

MS. TIPPETT: Right. The Muslim also has — yes.

DR. PELIKAN: ...is enough of a creed to animate the most rapid expansion of a religion in the history of humanity. From the death of the prophet in 632 to 732 in Gaul at the battle of Tours, Islam managed to spread from the Arabian Peninsula south and all the way across the northern coast of Africa to Gibraltar and into Spain and on into France in 100 years with this one little creed, and Christianity sprouts them at will right and left.

MS. TIPPETT: So what is it about Christianity that has needed creeds?

DR. PELIKAN: Well, what it is about religious faith that needs creed is that religious faith in general, prayer addressed "To Whom It May Concern," sentiment about some transcendent dimension otherwise undefined, does not have any staying power. It's OK to have that at 10:00 on a Sunday morning when you're out with your friends somewhere, but, in the darkest hours of life, you've got to believe something specific, and that specification is the task of the creed, because, much as some people may not like it, to believe one thing is also to disbelieve another. To say yes is also to say no. And clarifying what the yes is and then finding a way to say what it is we believe and the experimentation involved in that, I've made a very good living studying the experimentation, trying — how they tried on particular words for size. There are words in the Bible — important words — which didn't get into the creeds. You see...

MS. TIPPETT: Like what? I mean, give me a...

DR. PELIKAN: Like the designation of Christ as *logos*. *Logos* means both "word" and "reason," as in logic. And the gospel of John begins with the words that many people know: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God, and the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." And it was, in many ways, one of the most important terms in the arguments about the identity of Christ during the third and fourth centuries, and yet, in the only creed that all Christians or almost all Christians have in common, the so-called Nicene Creed, the term doesn't appear.

MS. TIPPETT: And why was that?

DR. PELIKAN: They wanted rather to make use of terms that would clarify simultaneously the distinction between God and His Son, that when I say I believe in Jesus Christ, I am not saying I believe in two gods. The doctrine of the Trinity was the effort to preserve monotheism. The real Unitarians were the Trinitarians.

MS. TIPPETT: And for some in those arguments, the *logos* image seemed to truly present Christ as another entity...

DR. PELIKAN: That's right.

MS. TIPPETT: ...separate from God.

DR. PELIKAN: As a subordinate and, therefore, in the nature of His being, different.

MS. TIPPETT: But I think, let's say, for modern Christians, when you say that *logos* is Christ as reason and logic, that might be something appealing that was left out of the creeds that would help if it were in them.

DR. PELIKAN: Well, sure. Of course, subsequently, the term *logos* is used very often in various creedal statements, statements that are intended to clarify, amplify, specify this or that out of the Nicene Creed. So it's not that the term was discarded, but that, in that particular creedal statement, it doesn't appear.

MS. TIPPETT: There was just a passage in your manuscript where you said there's this question that's raised in the New Testament, which gets raised again and again. It's a question that Jesus asked: Who do you say...

DR. PELIKAN: What think ye...

MS. TIPPETT: ...that I am? Who do you say I am?

DR. PELIKAN: Who do you say I am? Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: And that that question is asked again and again in every new tradition in every different culture. That actually is so simple that that really made sense to me, that that's an important question.

DR. PELIKAN: And that's the difference between Jesus and Socrates.

MS. TIPPETT: Say some more.

DR. PELIKAN: I mean, all of us are, in one sense or another, pupils of Socrates. John Stewart Mill said humanity cannot be reminded often enough that there was once a man named Socrates, and that's right. But there are no temples built to Socrates. Nobody ever wrote the "B Minor Mass" in honor of Socrates, because he calls upon people to learn and therefore to be honest with themselves, but he does not call upon them to take up their cross and follow. And both he and Jesus died for what they believed. But Jesus died in the conscious commitment to the salvation of the world.

And so wherever the message is preached and brought in whatever language it comes from, the language it comes to and the culture into which it penetrates must, at some stage of its maturation, learn to answer yet again the question: "Who do you say that I am?" Because the "you say" in that question is the culture in which we live. He's not asking, "Who does the fourth century say that I am?" when it was writing in Greek. That's important because, without that, we wouldn't be where we are. But, at some point, you have to be who and what you are in the only culture in which you're ever going to live, the only century in which you're going to live and die, and, in that century, you have to answer with whatever linguistic and philosophical equipment you have, you have to answer the question: "Who do you say that I am?"

MS. TIPPETT: From a 2003 interview with esteemed historian Jaroslav Pelikan, who died last week at the age of 82. I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *Speaking of Faith* from American Public Media.

Today, Jaroslav Pelikan on "The Need for Creeds." He authored the definitive history of Christian doctrine, and his 2003 compilation of Christian creeds and confessions from across the globe was the first such effort since 1877.

There was no small amount of intrigue and politicking in the early centuries of Christianity, but there was, nevertheless, a rich intellectual and spiritual dialogue led by great thinkers and theologians who are no longer part of the collective memory of modern Christians. Jaroslav Pelikan spent his life communing intellectually with these figures, and, in relationship with them, he formulated his thoughts on the meaning of creeds for people today.

DR. PELIKAN: I'm basically a historian rather than a contemporary theologian. I'll usually say that everybody's an expert on his own century, and I file minority report on behalf of the preceding 19. And the history of the movement of Christianity from one place to another, of the translations of the Bible into now more than 2,000 languages is the history of how one sought, in a new setting, not to speak the same thing but to say the same thing. You spoke quite differently. And to test the integrity and, therefore, the honesty and, therefore, ultimately, the authenticity of what you're saying, that's the task of a creed.

[Excerpt from *Christian chant*]

MS. TIPPETT: The only universal Christian creed is the Nicene Creed. It's common ground for Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Calvinist and many other Christians. It was drawn up at the first global meeting of the Christian church, the Council of Nicea, in 325, but it was only solidified 56 years later at the Council of Constantinople. The Nicene Creed is often sung or chanted. It begins "Credimus in unum Deum," "We believe in one God." Here is one of the earliest settings of the Latin words from the sixth century.

[Excerpt from *Latin chant of the Nicene Creed*]

READER: Reader: "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through Him all things were made. For us and for our salvation, He came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit, He became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate, He suffered death and was buried. On the third day He rose again in accordance with the scriptures; He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life who proceeds from the Father. With the Father and the Son He is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."

DR. PELIKAN: So, at one level, the reason for the universal authority of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed is the political and ultimately military authority it carried. And each conquest by the Roman Empire also brought the creed. Constantine's mother, St. Helen, came to Jerusalem, and it was she who found the sepulcher of Christ and found the true cross. And in the true cross were nails, which she sent to Constantine, and he had them melted down into a bit for his war horse. "Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war!" And as

he marched and conquered, the creed came right with it. And so, centuries later, in the great, modern expansion of Christianity during the 18th and, above all, the 19th century, my late colleague, Kenneth Scott Latourette at Yale, wrote a seven-volume history of the expansion of Christianity, and three of the seven volumes are on the 19th century. While it's not accidental, it's also the great century of colonialism. So the religion of the white man, which brought sanitation and a money economy and all the advantages and disadvantages of being modern, also brought the creeds.

MS. TIPPETT: Well, this is making me think that we should be banning this from modern worship.

DR. PELIKAN: And substituting another creed for it or no creed. It's a plausible suggestion, and, indeed, you are in the tradition of a fairly substantial group, particularly in the United States, as we celebrate the 200th anniversary of one of the greatest thinkers America produced, Ralph Waldo Emerson, for whom I have great personal affection.

My mother, who was born in Serbia, learned English partly reading Emerson. I still have her copies of Emerson from her girlhood. And Emerson was a graduate of Harvard Divinity School and was a Unitarian minister, so he was quite prepared to believe that everyone should compose a creed different from the tradition. He said to the Divinity School students at Harvard in 1838, "You must be yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Spirit and sing it out." The trouble with that is, you do it and then you do it a little bit more, and pretty soon you have to teach your children something, and so the best you can do is to teach them what you have, and you do that a generation or two, and all of a sudden, there you have...

MS. TIPPETT: ...a new creed.

DR. PELIKAN: ...a new creed.

MS. TIPPETT: All right.

DR. PELIKAN: And the only alternative to tradition is bad tradition.

MS. TIPPETT: Religious historian Jaroslav Pelikan.

And here is a contemporary setting of the Nicene Creed, "Summa" by Estonian composer Arvo Pärt.

(Excerpt from "Summa")

MS. TIPPETT: Tell me what you value when you say the Nicene Creed. I know you know the Nicene Creed not just in English but in many languages.

DR. PELIKAN: Partly because of what we've already talked about, namely that I'm very wrapped up in the whole history of the church and particularly in the history of its teaching, so that I cannot come at any question as though it had never been approached before. Partly because of that, the singing of the creed is a very important and cherished way of indicating a universality of the faith across not only space but time. To know that in the Philippines this morning this was the creed that was recited at Mass and to know that the Emperor Justinian in the sixth century and Thomas Aquinas in the 13th and my late father and grandfather all affirmed this — it's we, all of us together.

(Excerpt from "Mass in B Minor")

DR. PELIKAN: My late friend Stephen Jay Gould, who insisted with dogmatic fervor that he wasn't a believer, was a member — in addition to being a distinguished paleontologist and a terrific communicator, Steve Gould was a member of the Handel and Haydn Society in Boston, and so he sang all this Christian music. And in an interview several years ago that we were both involved in, he was asked about communication with other planets and other worlds, and how should we try to reach people who don't know our language or anything else. And he said, "We should play the Bach 'B Minor Mass' and say, in as many languages as we can, 'This is the best we have ever done, and we would like you to hear it, and we'd like to hear the best you have ever done.' And so he would want broadcast systems blaring across our solar system and beyond it with the "B Minor Mass," including "Credo in unum Deum."

MS. TIPPETT: Right. And that for you is the setting of this great creed of the church.

DR. PELIKAN: Sure.

(Excerpt from "Mass in B Minor")

MS. TIPPETT: This is *Speaking of Faith*. After a short break, more of my 2003 conversation with religious historian and thinker Jaroslav Pelikan, who died last week. The health of pluralist society, he believed, will depend, in part, on strong statements of belief.

Continue this exploration at speakingoffaith.org. This week, find all the music and chants you've just heard. [Use the Particulars section](#) on our Web site as a guide to this program. Download an MP3 to your desktop or [subscribe to our free weekly podcast](#). Listen at any

time, at any place. Also, [sign up for our free e-mail newsletter](#). All this and more at speakingoffaith.org.

I'm Krista Tippett. Stay with us. *Speaking of Faith* comes to you from American Public Media.

[Announcements]

MS. TIPPETT: Welcome back to *Speaking of Faith*, public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics and ideas. I'm Krista Tippett. Today, "The Need for Creeds" with religious historian Jaroslav Pelikan, who has died at the age of 82.

Jaroslav Pelikan produced the 20th century's most authoritative research on the history and meaning of Christian tradition. In his 80th year, Pelikan published *Credo*, a four-volume collection of Christian creeds from biblical times to the present and from around the world. He also wrote a definitive historical and theological guide that accompanied the collection. In 2003, I spoke with him about that manuscript and his larger work of illuminating religious tradition in order to enliven faith in the present and the future. And I asked Jaroslav Pelikan how reliable any creedal statement can be.

MS. TIPPETT: Isn't faith, at heart, about mystery, which can never be perfectly comprehended?

DR. PELIKAN: St. Augustine, who wrote probably the most important book about the Holy Trinity ever written, an enormous work in abstract Latin exploring if we are created in the image of God and God is Trinity, then how is the human soul a Trinity, and then looking at all kinds of biblical passages and all that. And at the end of this enormous work, on which he spent so many years, he said, "We have said this not in order to say something, but in order not to remain altogether silent," and that's right.

And I'm sure that a scientist feels that way, and, you know, in a sense, I'm a scientist. I work in historical science. So, for me, as a scholar would say — that's the more appropriate term now — the historical conditionedness of all of this, that each of these words has centuries of development behind it, that there was a time when people believed in a universe that had three floors and, therefore, Christ can descend into hell and ascend into heaven as though it were a lift in a small building with three levels, and that we can't believe that anymore, etc., all of that is in there, and I can't wipe it out, perform a frontal lobotomy, as though it weren't true. But, because you have to say something, we cannot but speak of those things which we have seen and heard, the apostles say in the book of Acts, because you have to say something. And because what you say is what you have received as it then passes through you, not around you, I say what I say in the creed, and it also performs the function of a flag.

MS. TIPPETT: How's that?

DR. PELIKAN: An identity by which we are known to those who may not be part of this community but who want to know what you are. You wear a flag in your lapel or you fly a flag from your sailboat or whatever. There is a mark of identity.

MS. TIPPETT: And that is one of the difficult sticking points for modern people living in an increasingly pluralistic world. Right? And you talk about this a great deal in your manuscript. You're very much aware of the modern discomfort.

DR. PELIKAN: Sure.

MS. TIPPETT: The discomfort of the modern consciousness with the whole notion of creed.

DR. PELIKAN: Yeah, I'm aware of it. I don't share it. But I'm — yes, I'm a professor in a secular university, and, as the saying goes, and some of my best friends have nothing to do with creeds. The interesting thing, though, is the world is much more pluralistic than it is relativistic, and those are often equated in the secular West. Because there are so many different beliefs, therefore, the best thing is not to have any beliefs. But all those other beliefs are very firm, as we're discovering, now that suddenly we're conscious that there are a billion Muslims in the world. And the need to have understanding and toleration and to guarantee religious liberty are often grounded by people on relativism. Because you can't really know anything for sure. Therefore, you must not constrain others to believe, which is basically what Thomas Jefferson said.

MS. TIPPETT: Right. Well, also, I think there's a sort of impulse — it's not always articulated — that if you proclaim a truth, that, in some way, you are negating the truth of another. People feel that way. Americans feel that way.

DR. PELIKAN: As I say, because they came to their understanding of religious toleration by way of a conviction that religious beliefs are relative. If we're going to have to wait for one billion Muslims to become relativists...

MS. TIPPETT: To live in our kind of pluralism?

DR. PELIKAN: Yeah, if that's the way we're going to get religious understanding, then we better fasten our safety belts. The most important systematic formulation of Jewish theology, *A Guide to the Perplexed* by Rabbi Moses Maimonides, Rambam, was written under the protection of a Muslim ruler and written in Arabic. And the most important statement of Eastern Orthodox Christianity ever written was entitled "On the Orthodox Faith" by John of Damascus, protected by the sultan of Damascus. So that here, in a Muslim-ruled culture, both of these scholars for the other two great monotheisms of the Book...

MS. TIPPETT: Made profound statements of their faith.

DR. PELIKAN: That's right. And it's hard to believe that that would have happened in modern Baghdad.

MS. TIPPETT: No, but that's where your communion with history and bringing those pieces of information into our modern consciousness is important.

DR. PELIKAN: Yeah, that's the first — and we have to have the — and so it must be possible — let's say within the framework of Islam — it must be possible to affirm the faith of Islam — "There's one God, and Mohammed is His prophet" — as a faith by which you would be willing to live and die, to affirm that and at the same time — not nevertheless, but therefore — to say that those who do not share this faith have the right to affirm their faith, partly because there is only one God and anybody who believes in God believes in that God, and there are not several gods lined up as — as alternatives.

MS. TIPPETT: And I can hear that as a very pertinent challenge to, say, Christians in America.

DR. PELIKAN: Well, sure, many of whom don't believe much of anything. You see, but the Second Vatican Council — this remarkable event of the 20th century, certainly the most important religious event of the 20th century — may be the most important event since the Reformation. At the Second Vatican Council the declaration on religious liberty, largely written by my late friend Father John Courtney Murray of the Society of Jesus, declared the right of religious liberty not on the basis of saying, "Well, doesn't matter much what you believe." Quite the opposite. Because you believe in the Christian tradition, which affirms creation of the human race in the image of God — the title of the declaration is "Dignitatis Humanae," "Human Dignity." Because of that, because therefore, religious faith is so important rather than because it's so trivial, therefore, you must not constrain others because faith can only be given freely.

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *Speaking of Faith* from American Public Media. Today, my 2003 conversation on the need for creeds with one of the great religious historians of our time, Jaroslav Pelikan, who died last week.

The creeds of the Christian church were principally meant to clarify the meaning of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Yet, even the oldest creeds were crafted centuries after the events. Many modern believers criticize the creeds for focusing exclusively on doctrine and failing to describe the way Jesus lived His life. When I spoke with Jaroslav Pelikan, I asked how he balanced his high regard for doctrine with other religious values, like spiritual vitality and acts of justice.

DR. PELIKAN: Every Sunday at worship — I'm a member of the Orthodox Church in America — in the *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*, which goes back to the fourth century, the chant is: "Let us love one another, that with one mind we may confess the Holy Trinity, one in essence and undivided. Let us love one another..."

MS. TIPPETT: That we may confess...

DR. PELIKAN: ...that we may confess. And so nobody says that it is the nature of God to be a creed, and the New Testament says it is the nature of God to be love. And so to get the priorities straight, even just as you're about to recite the creed, yet again, "Let us love one another." But if we love one another, then, for one thing, we shouldn't tell each other lies. We should tell each other the truth, as God has given it to us to see the truth, and if you don't want to tell a lie, tell the truth as the church has perceived and learned the truth, then you end up with something that has a distinct family resemblance to the creed, because we love one another and love our children and love the generations yet unborn, want to pass on to them what we have been blessed with, which is, among other things, the creed.

And the creed is, of course, primarily in the setting of prayer and worship. It's a liturgical affirmation more often chanted than spoken. A creed is spoken at baptism, but most of the rest of the time, in most of the traditions, it is sung. And that says something, too, because there are things we can sing that we have a hard time saying. And the language of love, which is, in our human experience, a curious combination of spontaneity and convention. There just aren't terribly many ways to say "I love you" besides saying "I love you." We're recording this in the state of Minnesota, in which the old story is of the Norwegian who loved his wife so much he almost told her. And so in one sense, it's a very conventional, repetitive, rote thing to do, to say "I love you." "You are the one I love. There is no one else I love." There aren't very many permutations.

And on the other hand, the language of love is spontaneous. You can't repress it. It comes time to say it, dam it, you say it and take the consequences. And that's how it is, how God's love is expressed both spontaneously by God and conventionally by God. God also says, "I love you," and in a very conventional way, and in turn, our love to God, which is always a response to a love that started with Him and ends in Him, our response to that love is the service of one another and of humanity but also an act of adoration.

(Excerpt from Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom)

MS. TIPPETT: This setting of the St. John Chrysostom text that Jaroslav Pelikan mentioned is by the Russian composer Sergey Rachmaninov.

(Excerpt from Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom)

MS. TIPPETT: This is giving me a lovely and exalted way to think about a remark you make in your book, that one thing that someone who studies all these creeds, as you've done, is struck by is the sheer repetitiveness of them. Right?

DR. PELIKAN: You should try to proofread them all in the course of a few weeks, as we did, and then you discover just how — you wonder, didn't I just read this one yesterday?

MS. TIPPETT: No, and it — but it's so interesting because I think that where someone goes when they hear that there are these thousands of creeds is that everybody's doing it differently all the time, and that's not really what you find. But I did want to dwell briefly on one that I sense is near and dear to your heart, which is this Maasai Creed...

DR. PELIKAN: Oh, yes.

MS. TIPPETT: ...the Maasai people of Africa, which was written around 1960, the Congregation of the Holy Ghost in east Nigeria. I don't know. Would you like to read some of your favorite...

DR. PELIKAN: Like most creeds, it is designed on a threefold pattern of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and comes out of the experience of Christians in Africa who were animists, fetishists who worshiped things in nature and the mystery of life and who then, upon receiving the Christian faith, began reciting the creeds as they had been taught, in this case by Roman Catholic missionaries, in other cases by Evangelical or Orthodox missionaries. But after a couple of generations of that, a Christian community gradually comes of age, achieves a level of maturation where you want to do it for yourself, do it your way, speaking in your context, using the images of your culture. And the question is can you do that without sacrificing the integrity of what you have received? It's easy just to repeat, but then it's not your own. It's easy to say what is your own as though nobody had ever said it before, but then the question is whether it's authentically Christian. And I think this manages to do both of those in a remarkable way.

(Excerpt from "Gem Na (The Nicene Creed)")

DR. PELIKAN: "We believe in one high God, who out of love created the beautiful world. 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, and showing that the meaning of religion is love. He was rejected by His people, tortured and nailed hands and feet to a cross, and died. He was buried in the grave, but the hyenas did not touch Him, and on the third day He rose from the grave."

(Excerpt from "Gem Na (The Nicene Creed)")

DR. PELIKAN: Now for one thing, the Nicene Creed as well as the Apostles' Creed go directly from born of the Virgin Mary to suffered under Pontius Pilate. And the whole story in the Gospels...

MS. TIPPETT: The life of Christ.

DR. PELIKAN: ...yeah, is just leapt over.

MS. TIPPETT: And that's what a lot of modern people have criticized in the creeds.

DR. PELIKAN: You go from Alpha to Omega. And here, see, He was born, as the creed said, He left His home — the creeds don't say that — and He was always on safari in Africa. When I read that the first time, a student of mine who'd been a member of a religious order, she was a sister, and she had been in a hospital in east Nigeria, and that's the creed they recited at their liturgy. And so she brought it to me, and I just got shivers, just the thought, you know, the hyenas did not touch Him and the act of defiance — God lives even in spite of the hyenas. But it's a good example of this model that I quoted earlier, that it is not enough to Christianize Africa. We have to Africanize Christianity.

(Excerpt from "Gem Na (The Nicene Creed)")

DR. PELIKAN: In the 1930s under the Nazis, a movement that wanted to purify Germany of foreign — that is to say Jewish — influences and to affirm Aryanism — that is to say, we do not want to Christianize Germany, we want to Germanize Christianity — taking the same model, and they ended up...

MS. TIPPETT: ...completely destroying...

DR. PELIKAN: ...denying that Jesus was Jewish, refusing to ordain as priest or minister anyone who had one-fourth Jewish blood. And so intuitively, one knows that this Maasai creed has the ring of authenticity and that that Nazi creed does not. But specifying that, explaining what is the real difference between this kind of — as they use the technical word — acculturation and that kind, is not easy. And by the time you're done, you've got to be talking about the nature of creeds.

MS. TIPPETT: Esteemed religious historian Jaroslav Pelikan who died last week. For all his reverence for the stability which the creeds offer, Pelikan's personal faith journey had something of a modern trend in it. In 1998, at the age of 75, after a lifetime as a Lutheran, Pelikan converted to another tradition, that of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Eastern Orthodox liturgy has preserved words and forms of worship from ancient times. I asked Jaroslav Pelikan how this personal conversion reflected his life spent in communion with tradition.

DR. PELIKAN: The centrality of tradition as a force, as the bearer of the message, as what the church believes even if I don't believe anything at a particular moment, and the capacity of tradition to sustain itself and to sustain the church is something with which I have been impressed partly through my own studies and partly by my faith and the realization that, of course, there was tradition before there was a Bible, that the Bible came out of tradition and...

MS. TIPPETT: Took a couple of hundred years to pull together.

DR. PELIKAN: ...and tradition went on interpreting the Bible after the last book of the Bible had been written, and a deep awareness and, I suppose, a deepening awareness, historically, of not only change but of continuity. I've never seen it in print that every day, since the middle of the first century, Christians have gathered together around bread and wine, thanked God and received it as the body and blood of Christ, that there has been no day when that didn't happen. The doctrines about it have changed, the liturgical forms have changed, all of that, but that this has happened every day — you multiply 2,000 by 365 with an extra day for leap years, that's a massive continuity, and creeds represent that. And you know, Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, he discovered one day that he had been speaking prose all his life. And so I sort of discovered that I'd been speaking Orthodox all my life. And so I didn't really convert. Convert is to change, and I didn't change. I simply discovered the continuity that had been there all along.

MS. TIPPETT: Well, isn't that what change is often about? I don't know.

DR. PELIKAN: Well, I suppose.
(*Excerpt from musical selection*)

MS. TIPPETT: Jaroslav Pelikan died on May 13th, 2006 at the age of 82. He was professor of history at Yale University for over four decades. He's the author of many books, including his 2003 opus *Credo*. More recently, Pelikan published *Whose Bible Is It? A History of Scriptures Through the Ages*.

Continue this conversation at speakingoffaith.org. Contact us with your thoughts. [Use the Particulars link](#) as a guide to this program. This week [find the Maasai Creed](#) that Jaroslav Pelikan recited as well as an autobiographical essay he published recently. Listen on demand for no charge to this and [previous programs in our Archive section](#) or [subscribe to our free weekly podcast](#). You can also [sign up for our e-mail newsletter](#), which brings my journal and transcripts into your in box. That's speakingoffaith.org.

This program was produced by Kate Moos, Mitch Hanley, Brian Newhouse, Colleen Scheck, and Jody Abramson with editor Ken Hom. Our Web producer is Trent Gilliss with assistance from Ilona Piotrowska. Special thanks this week to Marty Pelikan, who engineered this interview, and to St. Vladimir's Seminary. The executive producer of *Speaking of Faith* is Bill Buzeberg. And I'm Krista Tippett.

Visit speakingoffaith.org



Speaking of Faith®

with Krista Tippett

For more information on this topic, or to sign up for a weekly e-mail newsletter or free weekly podcasts, visit speakingoffaith.org.

Speaking of Faith® is public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics, and ideas. It is produced and distributed by American Public Media.