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Book Notes: Interpreting the Bible and the Constitution, by Jaroslav Pelikan

INTERPRETING THE BIBLE & THE CONSTITUTION, BY JAROSLAV PELIKAN. NEW HAVEN: YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2004. Pp. 216. \$33.50 hardcover.¹

BY SENWUNG LUK

What do the Christian Bible and the U.S. Constitution have in common? To answer that question, ideologues from the so-called religious right would certainly have no trouble filling volumes with prescriptive solutions. Professor Pelikan, though, has written a short and delectable work employing a much more insightful approach. Drawing on millennia of Christian tradition, and U.S. jurisprudence, he argues that both documents are “Great Codes,” whose interpretive communities face similar problems as they confront a guiding text.

What methods do they use to resolve their respective interpretive difficulties? Both interpretive communities, Professor Pelikan argues, can be divided into four segments: the people (or the faithful), the academic scholars, the practitioners, and the hierarchy. For a variety of reasons, the normative texts themselves are often inscrutable, not only in celebrated cases fought over by scholars and practitioners, but in daily struggles by the people to live according to their provisions. These ambiguities give the hierarchy—the courts, in the case of law—a great deal of latitude in interpretation. How can the hierarchy balance its freedom with the temptation to be “freewheeling,” when both normative texts lack a prescribed method for interpretation? Professor Pelikan argues that both interpretive communities have strategies for dealing with such issues. The interpreters in both search for the “spirit” of the work; they search for the original intent of the authors. But history would show that each successive generation has had a different understanding of their respective normative texts. How, then, does each interpretive community ensure that the development of doctrine, in the words of the Vatican, “continually draws new insights in harmony with the old”?² Professor Pelikan suggests the framework developed by Cardinal Newman, of seven “notes” that can help to discern between healthy development of doctrine, and its corruption.

¹ [*Interpreting*].

² *Ibid.* at 122.

Professor Pelikan, who is Sterling Professor Emeritus of History at Yale University, has filled this short volume with remarkable erudition and incisive observations. As an expert in the history of Christianity, his deep grasp of debates within law provide an excellent example of successful interdisciplinary work. At a time when the airwaves are filled with shouting matches about the relationship between law and religion, this book is a delightful respite.