

On the “Anti-Semitism” of Pavel Florensky, a New Martyr

Robert F. Slesinski

Abstract

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The author, a leading scholar on Pavel Florensky for three decades, here re-evaluates some of his views of the great Russian thinker in view of recently discovered evidence. Though a brilliant mind who was killed by the Communists – and as a result considered by some a “new martyr” and perhaps also a saint, albeit an unofficial one – Florensky seems, in two places at least, to have been unguarded in making comments that by the standards of today would be reprobated as anti-Semitic. Through a careful and discerning consideration of these comments in view of the rest of Florensky’s corpus, the author concludes that they are but blemishes that do not come close to destroying the justly towering reputation of Florensky as a scholar of wide-ranging and extraordinary erudition, a reputation made all the more outstanding by his faithful Christian and priestly witness to the end at the hands of a firing squad in 1937.



The very title of this study can only sound troubling, if not outright discordant, to the Christian ear. This is how it should be. But the latest research of this author has led him to revise his views on the matter directly at hand, which were only most

recently expressed.¹ The topic especially merits consideration in view of the fact that the name of the priest Pavel Florensky (1882–1937) has sometimes been listed among the new martyrs and saints of Russia under Communist rule. For instance, included on the icon of the holy new martyrs of Russia “written” (painted) by one Archimandrite Cyprian for the 1981 glorification (*proslavlenie*) – “canonization” is the more familiar term of the Latin Church – of these new martyrs by the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia is a panel on the right side of the depicted figures with a listing of representative martyred priests. Florensky’s name in abbreviated form is the fourth from the bottom, although this inclusion has since, it seems, been dismissed as having been done “by mistake.” Only to add to this confusion, a monastery formerly of this Church but now under the American Serbian Orthodox Church, the St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood of Platina, California, has even published (1987) one of Florensky’s early works, *Salt of the Earth*, in translation listing the author as “St. Paul Florensky.” Not too surprisingly, there is also even been an online listing of him among the ranks of the Russian new martyrs.²

These data notwithstanding, it would seem that Florensky has *not* been formally glorified by the synods of the Russian Orthodox Church either abroad or within the territorial lands of the Moscow Patriarchate. Although one could argue in line with Orthodox tradition that Florensky’s status as a “new martyr” obviates the need for a “formal” glorification, it suffices just to note there has been recognition of him as a saint “by acclamation” in some quarters of the Russian Orthodox Church and beyond. There is thus all the more reason to evaluate the charge of “anti-Semitism,” as has been raised, in regard to Florensky’s persona in view of any potential formal glorification.

The term “new martyr” itself bears a brief commentary. “New martyrs” presume “old martyrs,” these in fact being the

¹ As articulated in my laudatory book review of Avril Pyman, *Pavel Florensky: A Quiet Genius. The Tragic and Extraordinary Life of Russia’s Unknown da Vinci*, *Slavic Review*, 70 (2011): 468–69.

² See the entry in *Wikipedia*, “New Martyrs:” en.wikipedia.org/New_Martyr.

first Christian martyrs of the early first millennium of Christianity at the time of the catacombs. The term “new martyr” was coined after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. The first of the “new martyrs” are the victims of the Ottoman Empire. Now the term is significantly expanded with the inclusion of those who suffered and were killed for the faith during the years of militant atheism in Soviet lands. Florensky certainly qualifies in this regard.

Considering the acclaim afforded Florensky’s voluminous writings and the unparalleled expansiveness of his professional activity, from the purely churchly and literary to the equally purely scientific, both in the applied and theoretical sciences, one can only with the greatest reluctance broach the subject of a possible anti-Semitic side to his character. The true paucity of direct evidence in this regard and, indeed, its relatively late provenance in coming to light can only call for caution and detachment in weighing it. On this score the prudential judgment of Florensky’s biographer, Avril Pyman, is admirable.

In her detailed study of his life, she turns every stone, as it were, she is aware of, especially the archival pieces to which the esteemed German researcher, Michael Hagemester, first drew attention at an international symposium on Florensky (“Pavel Florenskij – Tradition und Moderne”) held at the University of Potsdam, Germany, over April 5–9, 2000.³ Even if Florensky’s anonymous preface to a collection prepared by M.A. Novoselov (himself later also a “new martyr”) dedicated to the “Jewish question” entitled *Israel in the Past, Present, and Future* has a “moderate and moderating” Florensky speaking,⁴ his active, however “hidden,” dealings with V.V. Rozanov (1856–1919), a notorious anti-Semite at the time, can

³ See his contribution, “Wiederverzauberung der Welt: Pavel Florenskijs Neues Mittelalter,” in Norbert Franz, Michael Hagemester, eds., *Pavel Florenskij – Tradition und Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001), 21–41, esp. 33–41.

⁴ On this point Pyman and I agree. See her discussion in *Pavel Florensky*, 104–5. The preface to Novoselov’s volume is found in *Sviashchennik* (the Priest) Pavel Florenskii, *Sochineniia v chetyrekh tomakh* (Works in four volumes) (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo “Mysl”, 1994, 1996, 1998, 1999), 2:705–7, with special commentary on p.808 by S.M. Polovinkin, who confirms Florensky’s authorship based on archival findings. Henceforth *Sochineniia*.