

Pavel Florensky's Personalism

Richard Armstrong

Abstract

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In this paper, the author examines the scarcely studied theme of *personalism* in Pavel Florensky's magnum opus, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*. Florensky's ontology of the person is set in the context of several genetic influences: the fourfold intellectual *Sitz im Leben* of *Slavophilism*, *Romanticism*, *Symbolism* and *Sophiology*, followed by the threefold thought nexus of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Henri Bergson, and St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Florensky's personalist metaphysics is then unpacked through the medium of eight categories: (1) Dynamic-Numeric Identity vs. Generic Identity; (2) *Homoousios* vs. *Homoiousios*; (3) The Trinity as Ground and Model; (4) Relationality; (5) Love; (6) Participation; (7) Incommunicability; and (8) Creative Self-Positing. The study culminates with a global overview of Florensky's antecedent contributions to the foundations of personalism and his relevance for the twentieth-century personalist movement. The author concludes that the Russian prodigy Florensky is yet to receive his laurel as one of the most significant personalists of contemporary times.

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Introduction

Pavel Florensky is an enigmatic figure¹ of singular genius in twentieth-century Russian thought² whose philosophical and theological legacy remains in large part unassimilated by both the East and the West.³ With translations of his works still under way or only just recently made available,⁴ Florensky's intellectual corpus is yet to receive the study and critical scrutiny that it deserves and requires.⁵ As Robert Slesinski relates, "Secondary literature on his thought has hardly been exhaustive and, indeed, requires major supplemental studies if Florensky's specific contributions are to be given a thorough hearing and evaluation."⁶ To date, the widespread Russian fascination with Florensky has remained predominantly on the

¹ Robert Slesinski mentions a spectrum of opinions on the personality of Florensky that range from the positive and laudatory to the negative and derisive. For some Florensky was an endearing, mystical, and irresistible figure, to whom is attributed the conversion of such notables as Sergius Bulgakov and Nicolas Lossky. For others he was proud, a fanatical ascetic, a decadent aesthete, and said to be closer to Lucifer than Christ. See Robert Slesinski, "Fr. Paul Florensky: a Profile," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 26 (1982): 12–13.

² John Meyendorff calls Florensky "one of the major speculative theologians of the twentieth century." See Id., "Foreword," in R. Slesinski, *Pavel Florensky: A Metaphysics of Love* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 11. Slesinski declares that "Florensky was unquestionably one of the most gifted personalities ever to appear on the scene of Russian intellectual history": "Florensky: a Profile," 3. Many Russian thinkers such as N. Lossky, F.I. Udelov, B. Filipoff and S. Bulgakov likened him to Leonardo da Vinci for the breadth and brilliance of his thought and achievement. See Slesinski, "Profile," 3. Even the repressive Soviet regime that exiled and incarcerated him acquiesced to a similar positive appraisal in the *Soviet Philosophical Encyclopedia*, as Slesinski's "Profile" notes (15).

³ Slesinski, "Profile," 3; Id., "Fr. Paul Florensky: New Bibliographical Entries," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 30 (1986): 162.

⁴ Robert Slesinski, "The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in 12 Letters," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 43 (1999): 96, 100.

⁵ Robert Slesinski, "Florenskii's Principle of Dynamic Identity and Personalist Metaphysics," in *Pavel Florenskij – Tradition und Moderne*, eds. Norbert Franz et al (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2001), 161; Slesinski, "Profile," 3.

⁶ Slesinski, "Dynamic Identity," 161.

general cultural level,⁷ with the exception of focused studies in aesthetics and semiotics.⁸ Western attention to Florensky, for its part, has gravitated principally toward his theological contributions.⁹ Meanwhile, Florensky's work is beginning to garner more interest from religious and non-religious scholars on both sides.¹⁰ One aspect of Florensky's thought in glaring need of further scholarly analysis is his *personalism*. Robert Slesinski and Michael Aksionov Meerson have launched important initial research in this area, focusing on the implications of Florensky's principle of *dynamic-numeric identity* for personalist metaphysics.¹¹ As Slesinski laments, however, "the secondary literature has afforded only scant treatment of this important topic."¹² The goal of the present study will be to answer the imperative need for additional investigation in this field.

The following essay, then, will attempt to contribute to the increasing scholarly study of Florensky's personalism. Here, exclusive attention will be given to Florensky's magnum opus,

⁷ Robert Slesinski, "The Relationship of God and Man in Russian Religious Philosophy from Florensky to Frank," in Id., *Essays in Diakonia: Eastern Catholic Theological Reflections* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 145.

⁸ Slesinski, "Relationship of God and Man," 146; Slesinski, "Bibliographical," 162. See also Robert Slesinski, "Hermeneutic Philosophy in the 20th Century (Pavel Florensky)," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 31 (1987): 255–258.

⁹ For specific publications, see Slesinski, "Bibliographical," 162, note 2, as well as note 11 below.

¹⁰ Slesinski, "Bibliographical," 162.

¹¹ The works on this topic by Slesinski and Michael Aksionov Meerson are several. For Slesinski, see the works noted in preceding notes. Meerson's works include: "Florensky: The Trinity as Love Grounds the Principle of Identity," in Id., *The Trinity of Love in Modern Russian Theology – The Love Paradigm and the Retrieval of Western Medieval Love Mysticism in Modern Russian Trinitarian Thought (from Solov'ev to Bulgakov)* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1998), 117–36.

¹² Slesinski, "Dynamic Identity," 162. Later, on p.175, Slesinski, states that "the secondary literature on Florenski . . . has hardly noticed the significance of this contribution" [i.e., his personalism].