

Pavel Florensky: His Life and Work

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Abstract

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In this short biography, the author sketches the life of the Russian polymath, priest, mystic and martyr Pavel Florensky. Two lenses are adopted in presenting this exceptional personality: (1) the *biographical photograph* and (2) the *biographical portrait*. The first perspective provides the basic empirical data and material-efficient causes of Florensky's life. The periods and themes covered in this section are Florensky's *Early Life*, *Professional Life*, *Life Extinguished* and *Life Remembered*. The second perspective uncovers the true being and formal-final causes of Florensky's life. The themes developed in this section are Florensky the *Ontologico-Symbolical Seeker* and Florensky the *Icono-Mystical Witness*. Afterward, a third and final section is appended, outlining a brief summary of the most serious appraisals of the person of Florensky. The study concludes that Florensky stands out as one of twentieth-century Christianity's most outstanding luminaries, and arguably as one of the most intellectually, morally, spiritually and mystically endowed figures in all of Christian history.



Introduction

Russian polymath, priest, mystic and martyr Pavel Florensky is one of the towering Christian figures of the twentieth century. Florensky's remarkable life is a lofty blend of monumental scholarly achievement, profound spirituality and ultimate Christian sacrifice. In the intellectual domain, the encyclopedic and diversely talented Florensky made expert contributions in disciplines ranging from geometry, physics, philosophy, theology, and art theory.¹ His erudition² ranks him among the most outstanding minds of contemporary times³ and his titanic creative output is compared by many to the breadth and brilliance of both Leonardo da Vinci⁴ and Blaise Pascal.⁵

¹ For a more thorough rendering of the remarkable range of fields in which Florensky was competent, see German Troitsky, "In Memoriam of the Reverend Pavel Florensky," *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* 11 (1972): 76; Nicholas O. Lossky, "Father Pavel Florensky" in *History of Russian Philosophy* (New York: International University Press, 1951), 176–77; V. Nikitin, "In Memory of Father Pavel Florensky," *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* 4 (1982): 11.

² Lossky, "Father Pavel Florensky," 176; Idem., "The Successors of Vladimir Solovyev," *The Slavonic Review* 3 (1924): 96. The use of such superlative language is common to nearly all the secondary sources on Florensky, even by harsh critics such as Leonid Sabaneeff, "Pavel Florensky: Priest, Scientist, and Mystic," *Russian Review* 20 (1961): 312–325. For typical laudatory examples, see the reviews of Pyman's biography of Florensky by A. Louth, J. Elsworth, R. Bird, P. Davidson, M. Carlson, R. Milner, G. Hosking and Archbishop R. Williams: Avril Pyman, *Pavel Florensky A Quiet Genius: The Tragic and Extraordinary Life of Russia's Unknown Da Vinci* (London/New York: Continuum Books, 2010).

³ Robert Slesinski declares that "Florensky was unquestionably one of the most gifted personalities ever to appear on the scene of Russian intellectual history": "Fr. Paul Florensky: A Profile," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 26 (1982). Goltz classes Florensky as "one of the outstanding intellects of our century" (i.e. the 20th century): Hermann Goltz, "'He Backed the Logos to Defeat the Chaos': the Death of Pavel Florensky," *Religion in Communist Lands* 18 (1990): 343. Meyendorff calls Florensky "one of the major speculative theologians of the twentieth century": John Meyendorff, foreword to *Pavel Florensky: A Metaphysics of Love*, by Robert Slesinski (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 11.

⁴ The first of Florensky's contemporaries to make this comparison was V.I. Ivanov in 1921. See mention of the scholarship of A. Shishkin in Hegumen Innokenty, "International Symposium in Bergamo in Memory of Father Pavel Florensky," *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* 3 (1989): 51. Others

In the spiritual realm, Florensky stands out as a mystic of a unique type. His theology and suffering witness consummate in a manner rarely encountered in Christianity's two-thousand-year-old history.⁶ And yet, for all his prodigious intellectual-spiritual endowment, Florensky, more than seventy years after his death, is still only moderately known to Christians of the East and scarcely known at all to Christians of the West.⁷ A number of biographical sources exist on Florensky, but in many cases require either updating or deeper insight, or in instances without shortcomings, collectively call out for synthesis on certain key points. Meanwhile, the first authoritative, full-length biography of Florensky,⁸ which appeared in English only last year, invites the work of digest and summary. The purpose of this study – with the subsidiary ends of remedying some of the biographical lacunae concerning Florensky and of promoting a more popular appreciation for Florensky's legacy

in Florensky's circle to use the epithet include Bulgakov and Lossky: Sergius Bulgakov, "Le Père Paul Florensky," in Pavel Florensky, *La perspective inversée: L'Iconostase et autres écrits sur l'art*, trans. and ed. Françoise Lhoest (Lausanne, Switzerland: Éditions l'Age d'Homme, 1992), 22, and Lossky, "Father Pavel Florensky," 176–77. In recent years, almost every commentator makes reference to this title. S. Demidov and C. Ford are critical of this attribution, however, pointing out the discontinuity between Florensky and Da Vinci: Sergei S. Demidov and Charles E. Ford, "On The Road to a Unified World View: Priest Pavel Florensky – Theologian, Philosopher, Scientist," in *Mathematics and The Divine: A Historical Study*, ed. T. Koetsier and L. Bergmans (Boston: Elsevier, 2005), 610.

⁵ For this comparison, see Bulgakov, "Père Paul," 22; Donald Nicholl, "One of a Great Cloud of Witnesses: Father Pavel Florensky," *Sourozh* 58 (1994): 29.

⁶ These two mostly novel claims will be substantiated later in this biographical sketch.

⁷ As a primary gauge of the overall dearth of knowledge of the life of Florensky, the first ever book-length biography of Florensky in any language only appeared in English in March 2010: Pyman, *Quiet Genius*. A widespread, but superficial, acquaintance with Florensky in Russia notwithstanding, scholarship on the life of Florensky is still largely in the custody of a small community of specialists, some noted earlier, and others discussed below (see especially note 9 below). Pyman's very recent, authoritative biography of Florensky is a good indicator of the next evolution toward a broader and more popular concern for Florensky's life and legacy.

⁸ Pyman, *Quiet Genius*.