

Pavel Florensky (1882–1937) was an outstanding figure of Russia's Silver Age and religious-philosophical renaissance. Avril Pyman's study, the first full-length intellectual biography of him in English, is a rich guide to his life and thought. She refers to him as Russia's "da Vinci" to capture the extraordinary range of his intellectual interests, which spanned philosophy, theology, mathematics, physics and other sciences, electrical engineering, aesthetics and art history, philosophy of language, and literature. She masterfully shows how Florensky combined these various areas into an "integral worldview," a quest characteristic of the best minds of the Silver Age.

Born to a Russian father and Armenian mother, Florensky grew up and went to school in Georgia. His family abjured religious practice, but from his early years he had a sense that nature was the manifestation of the divine. Later he expressed this in Kantian terms, believing that the noumenal shines through the phenomenal, which was somehow its incarnation or symbol. He pursued his interests in natural science at the Second Tiflis Classical Gymnasium and published his first scientific articles. Before graduating in 1900 he experienced, under the influence of Tolstoy's *Confession* and Vladimir Solovyov, a type of spiritual crisis and the first intimations of a religious vocation. That September he entered the Department of Higher Mathematics in the Physico-Mathematical Faculty at Moscow University.

Pyman gives an insightful account of Florensky's association with the Moscow school of the philosophy of mathematics, headed by Professor Nikolai Bugaev. In contrast to the supposed support of mathematics for determinism and positivism, Florensky took Bugaev's arystontology
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(or theory of discontinuous functions) to be a rigorous, scientific demonstration of the possibility of freedom and creativity. "Possibly," Pyman speculates, "it was the implications of these unmathematical ideas for the human person that the young Florensky found most empowering in his search for a 'world view'" (32). He believed that human freedom and creativity entailed, in turn, a theistic metaphysics. His deepening religious interests intersected with the "new religious consciousness" at the turn of the century. He contributed to Symbolist journals and became close friends with Bugaev’s son, Andrei Bely. Soon Florensky the "god-seeker" found God in the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1904, having graduated, he entered the Moscow Theological Academy (MDA) at Sergiev Posad. Pyman devotes close attention to his association, over the next two decades, with MDA and with the Trinity St. Sergius Monastery. Her book reveals much about the importance of these two institutions in Russian Orthodox theology and culture.

Florensky’s faith was grounded in Christ and the church. His 1904 dialogue “On the empirical and the esoteric,” first published nearly fifty years after his death, develops a powerful Christology that, as Pyman makes clear, preserves human autonomy and responsibility. In 1908 he graduated at the top of his class and chose to remain at MDA as a research fellow and lecturer. He was ordained a priest in 1911, became editor of the Academy’s journal Bogostovitski veknik in 1912, and was appointed professor extraordinarius in 1914. He participated in the Vladimir Solovovy Religious-Philosophical Society in Moscow, in the publishing group Put’, and especially in the Circle of Seekers of Christian Enlightenment.

Pyman devotes a chapter to Florensky’s magnum opus, The Pillar and Ground of Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theology in Twelve Letters (1914). For him, theodicy “is not a justification of God in the face of evil, but of the divine Truth to be ascertained even in this sinful world,” as Richard Gustafson puts it in his fine introduction to Boris Jakim’s translation of Pillar and Ground (Princeton UP, 1997). The path to truth is not western rationalism but what the Slavophile Ivan Kireevsky formulated as integral “believing reason,” which is capable of unifying the subject and object of knowledge in an immediate, concrete intuition of reality. The model of such mystical, direct knowledge is the church, “the pillar and ground of truth” (1 Timothy 3:15).

Pyman nicely relates Florensky’s epistemology of integrity or wholeness to the theodicy problem in the strict sense, showing how he treated sin as disintegration and salvation as the restoration of fallen humanity to the image and likeness of God. The salvific process culminates in theosis, “the unconditional divinization of human nature in the person of Jesus Christ” (79). She explains well the distinctive, ontological thrust both of Florensky’s thought and of Russian theology more generally (especially in the MDA). This ontological orientation helps to account for his fascination with the idea of Sophia, which he conceived as God’s creative being.

Florensky believed that “if a Russian philosophy is possible, then [it is] only as an Orthodox philosophy, as the philosophy of the Orthodox faith” (95). One unfortunate consequence of this belief was correspondence and other material (only recently attributed to him) published in Vasili Rozanov’s inflammatory The Jews’ Attitude to the Smell and Feel of Blood (1914). He was intrigued by the subject of blood rituals—this at the time of the Mendel Beilis affair—and defended Rozanov, who insisted that Beilis (or another Jew) was probably guilty. Pyman tries to give a careful account of the whole issue and is reluctant to charge Florensky with anti-Semitism, despite the evidence recent critics (such as Michael Hagemeister) have found for it. At this time he became involved in another controversy: imatialia, or veneration of the name. He sided with those (like his close friend Sergei Bulgakov) who believed in the indwelling presence of God in his name. He turned increasingly to the philosophy of language, to aesthetics, and to the philosophy and history of cult and culture, writing about them in a series of essays for a new book project, At the Watersheds of Thought, on which he worked from 1917 to 1926 but which remained unfinished. This project benefited greatly from his membership on the Commission for the Preservation of Art and Antiquities in the Trinity St. Sergius Monastery (1917–1920). One result, for example, was his famous essay "Iconostasis."
Florensky was little interested in politics (in theory or practice), a significant omission in his quest for a comprehensive worldview. His student years at MDA coincided with the 1905 revolution and movement for church reform, but for the most part he remained aloof. Pyman downplays his involvement with the combative Christian Brotherhood of Struggle, led by Vladimir Em and Valentin Sventitsky. One important exception was his March 1906 sermon, "The cry of blood," protesting the execution of a navy lieutenant who had supported his mutinous sailors in the 1905 Sevastopol insurrection. Florensky declared that "every shot of the firing squad was aimed at the body of Christ." With the sermon, which was printed as a brochure and circulated by the Brotherhood, "Florensky's fame spread throughout Russia" (55). By 1917, he preferred the transcendent authority of the "the sacred knout" to the immanent (and false) freedom of democracy. He did not regard it as a compromise to put his scientific expertise at the service of the Soviet state. He worked on the State Planning Commission for the Electrification of Soviet Russia and held other technical and research positions, served as editor of the Technical Encyclopedia, and wrote many scientific and technical articles. In 1933 he was arrested and sentenced to hard labor in Siberia. Transferred to Solovki in 1934, he was executed outside Leningrad in December 1937. Florensky was rehabilitated in 1958; some now seek his canonization in the Russian Orthodox Church. But Pyman seeks to write biography, not hagiography. She admirably succeeds.

Randall A. Poole, College of St. Scholastica