

Research article

UDC 215

https://doi.org/10.25803/26587599_2023_48_31

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Pavel Florensky and the Future of Thought¹

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ABSTRACT: The article examines the legacy of priest Pavel Florensky in the context of European culture from antiquity to the present day. The dialogue in which Florensky is a perceiving and continuing comrade-in-arms is conducted with Plato, Aristotle, with the Fathers of the Church and Neoplatonists of different eras, with Nicholas of Cusa, Leibniz, with mathematicians — from the Pythagoreans to Kantor; Florensky's thought echoes Kant's constructions and builds on them. Belonging to the culture of the "Silver Age", Father Pavel meets Nietzsche at a philosophical crossroads, becomes friends with Andrei Bely, becomes the object of criticism from Fr. Georgy Florovsky. In the space of Florensky's creative dialogue and polemics with philosophers and theologians, the essence of his trinitology and sophiology is revealed. The most important property of the heritage of Fr. Pavel Florensky is a combination of traditionalism, consisting in strict adherence to the teachings of the church fathers and the Orthodox tradition as a whole, and freshness of ideas (up to the coincidence with the understanding of contemporary political trends), which is urgently needed in the modern Christian world both in the East and in the West.

KEYWORDS: Theology, Sobornost, Solovyov, Nietzsche, Christology, Trinitology

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1. We publish a report at the conference "Sophiology and Ecclesiology of Archpriest Sergius Bulgakov and Priest Pavel Florensky" (October 3–5, 2022).

FOR CITATION: Milbank J. (2023). "Pavel Florensky and the Future of Thought".
The Quarterly Journal of St. Philaret's Institute, iss. 48, pp. 31–50.
https://doi.org/10.25803/26587599_2023_48_31.

There have been countless martyrs for religion and a few for science at the hands of religion, like Giordano Bruno, and very nearly Galileo Galilei.

But Pavel Florensky was a martyr at once for religion and for science, at the hands of the Bolshevik atheists, whom he described as possessing the very consummation of a bourgeois mentality. He (Florensky) was arrested and sent to the GULAG, serving his sentence on the Solovetsky Islands. In 1937, he was sentenced to death and shot, presumably near Leningrad, on suspicion of seeking to revert to a Medieval cosmology, though he had done so in the name of the most up-to-date science, which the unimaginative Bolsheviks themselves suspected of bourgeois deviation².

More specifically, Florensky had invoked Dante Alighieri. He had spoken of the moment in the *Commedia* when Dante and Virgil continue in a straight line out of the Inferno, yet, without deviating, find themselves on the exact other side of the cosmic sphere in Purgatory. He had indicated the way in which, in the same long poem, the spiritual spheres are said to be smaller than the physical ones and yet seem to contain them. And he had invoked Dante's casual mentioning of the fact that the sum of the angles of an equilateral triangle, drawn on the surface of a sphere, would not add up to the sum of two right-angles³.

More generally, he had suggested that, in the light of the most avant-garde science, the Church might be vindicated against Copernicus and Galileo after all. Since the universe is enclosed within space-time relativity, it is apparently finite, and bounded perhaps by a more ethereal empyrean of pure light that is the more direct presence of God. And since all motion is absolutely relative, there may well be a sense in which the earth is at rest. Because it is the habitation of persons, who turn out (as we shall see) to be the only possible locus of truth in Florensky's post-sceptical philosophy, it might reasonably be thought that all other cosmic bodies revolve around it.

2. See: [Pyman, 113–182].

3. See: [Florensky 2014; Florensky 2021].

These were not the musings of a crank, even though Florensky toyed much with the occult and suggested revisionary approaches to remote space and the deep past that might have rendered him perfectly at home on the so-called post-truth (or perhaps post officially sanctioned truth) internet today. He was, instead, a highly accomplished mathematician, scientist and practical technician, author of Soviet textbooks on its new electricity grid. His suggestions that pre-modern cosmology might now be taken seriously followed for him for his familiarity with modern and *avant-garde* mathematical and scientific thinking: with non-Euclidean geometry, Cantorean set theory, Einsteinian relativity and the stirrings of quantum physics.

For this reason, those who have compared Florensky with Leonardo Da Vinci would not seem to be unwarranted⁴. If he was not a painter, he was certainly a poet and an important contributor to aesthetic theory. And more like that other Renaissance thinker, Nicholas of Cusa, whom he sometimes invoked as a fellow-spirit, he was also and above all a philosopher-theologian who sought to link that vocation with his scientific and mathematical one.

His status as a true polymath renders him somewhat alien and exotic to our period of ultra-specialisation. For he belonged to the Russian Silver Age, around the turn of the Twentieth Century, and to its accompanying religious renaissance: a last flowering of European Romanticism, mutated into Symbolism, which involved a degree of the blending of religion, the arts, science, politics and philosophy that already no longer seemed really feasible in Western Europe at that time.

And yet, in other respects, Florensky now seems our contemporary, and much more so than many other Christian thinkers of the Twentieth Century who once seemed so crucial.

This is for several linked reasons: like so many other Russians, he simply ignored any divide between philosophy and theology. He tried to wrestle with the paradoxical implications of modern physics and mathematics. He was a vitalist much influenced by Henri Bergson, who is much back in fashion today. He was profoundly concerned with the human relationship to the natural world. In response to Nietzsche and in company with many other Russians, in the wake of Vladimir Solovyov, he tried to integrate the sacrally erotic into a Christian world view and he extended this (though without downgrading the centrality of heterosexual marriage, nor the exemplarity of the ascetic life),

4. Notably by A. Pyman.

into an almost unprecedented acceptance of quasi-sacramental homoerotic relationships⁵.

So it is not just Florensky's predilection for the esoterically alternative, which, was, again, normal for the Silver Age, which tend to render Florensky our contemporary.

I have just mentioned the Russian response to Nietzsche in one respect, but there are two others which resonate with us now.

First, Nietzsche had already looked to Russia, either to renew decadent Europe or to overwhelm it with an infusion of the barbaric and Dionysiac⁶. The Russian intellectuals who were aware of this, reciprocated with a certain resonance in attitude. Russian Eurasianism is to a degree a descendant of this Russian Nietzscheanism: insistent on a civilisational plurality of values, and on an ineffable energy, at once material and spiritual, that arises from a fusion of race, soil, climate and imperial ethnic blending. For this tendency, the supposedly Asiatic is to the fore and the purely European, including the Latin Christian, is destined to end its global sway⁷.

On the whole, however, the Slavophiles of the Silver Age, like Solovyov himself, had much more envisaged a new coming together of the Latin Christian West and the Greek Christian East — sometimes (as with Vladimir Solovyov), in preparation for an envisaged final apocalyptic battle with the Far East and especially China. In this vision, the Latin 'Alexandrian' rationality would be more fused with the Greek-Slavic intuitive energy, rooted in nature and sprung from the vast soil of the steppes, forests and plains⁸. It would be understood that everything finite is at once fluid and formed, and in both respects merely symbolic of something that transcends both and can bring the world into relational harmony, *sobornost*, beyond Nietzschean agonistics⁹.

Despite the envisaging of an eventual conflict with what he unfortunately termed 'the yellow man' by Solovyov, in the case of Florensky himself (born in the Muslim territory of Azerbaijan, though brought up in Tbilisi in Georgia), and many other Silver Age thinkers, there was a profound respect for the traditions of other world religions. This went along with a conviction that part of Russia's destiny was to mediate between the Christian faith and the world-views of the fur-

5. See: [Solovyov 1950; Pyman, 27–151].

6. See: [Nietzsche 1974, 93–94] and [Nietzsche 1971, 126–129].

7. For the importance of Nietzsche in developing this outlook from the 1930's onwards, see: [Bassin, 122–130].

8. See: [Solovyov 1990; Solovyov 2005].

9. See: [Bely 1985a, 73–92]. For Florensky's origins in Symbolist thought, see: [Florensky 2017, 25–70].

ther East. Not the least aspect of Florensky's encyclopaedic endeavours was a concern with the place of Christianity within the overall history of religions.

Secondly, and more crucially, the Russian engagement with Nietzsche ensured that they embraced much of what we now tend to regard as a "post-modern" scepticism, itself emergent in part from the French Nietzschean revival of the Nineteen-Sixties.

And yet the Silver Age also anticipated what has tended to come next: namely an attempt to escape from scepticism, not through a now-exploded foundationalism, finitism and humanism, but through a renewed metaphysical speculation that has tended variously to engage, just like Florensky, with set-theory, non-standard logics, neo-vitalist biology and aporetic physics, and which has sometimes taken religious as well as rather mystically atheist forms — whose character Florensky might have recognised from the specifically Russian modes of dialectical materialism¹⁰.

Given this situation, if its exigencies have been understood, Christian thought in our own day is faced with the task, beyond mere "theology", of seeking to renew a Biblically-based metaphysical vision of the kind which was articulated by several of the Church Fathers. But in this respect, Florensky's thought, which has scarcely as yet been fully comprehended, stands in many ways still beyond and before us in its degree of sophistication, matched perhaps in its contemporary theological relevance only by the thought of the so-called French spiritualists, or Biranians (after Maine de Biran), some of whom were his contemporaries and some known to his older friend and influencer Sergius Bulgakov after his exile to France — besides Bergson, people like Maurice Blondel, Louis Lavelle, Aimé Forest and Simone Weil¹¹. Indeed, as we shall shortly see, the Christian Pythagorean outlook of both Blondel and Weil was shared by Florensky¹².

In his case, as I have already intimated, this relevance is above all to do with his philosophical scepticism, which he insisted must follow from the rigours of reason. It is also to do with his equal insistence that only Christian doctrine and Christian life, the two being inseparable, could overcome that scepticism.

How are we to understand this, in its main outlines? The Nietzschean legacy was read by the Russian Symbolists as exploding the key

10. See, for example: [*Alloa, During*].

11. See: [*Viellard-Baron; Bellantone, Viellard-Baron*].

12. See: [*Gabellieri 2004*].

rationalist principles of first, fixed identity, second, full and sufficient explanation, and third the unbroken continuity of reality and of any legitimate chain of reasoning.

Florensky fully followed suit. There is, first, no stable identity, whether of thing or of subject, and everything is self-contradictory, in violation of the law of non-contradiction which says that A cannot also be not-A. If each thing is only itself, then it is an empty blank only identifiable by its exclusion of everything else, which in turn and reciprocally must therefore also be blanks, incapable of identifying anything, even negatively. This was Florensky's implicit critique of any Hegelian negative dialectics¹³.

Instead, we see how the very core of rationalism seems to usher us towards the nihilistic. Nothing can be identified except by contradictorily equating it with what is not itself, since every quality or relation is always transferable, and in this game of transfer, all properties are hollowed out, for the reason we have just indicated. Identities simply vanish down a black hole and so they merge into each other to constitute a non-identifiable morass, after all.

Just as space obliterates, so also does time. I am not what I was and will be not what I am now, yet somehow (if we wish to hold onto personal identity) it is the same "me" who is not only the bearer of these contradictory properties, but is himself contradicted by them, if I have no characterizable personality outside my predicated attachments¹⁴. It seems that, as Florensky puts it:

The present opposes itself to the past and its future in time, just as, in space, a thing is opposed to all things that lie outside it. In time, as well, consciousness is self-disharmonious. Contradiction is everywhere and always, but identity is nowhere and never [*Florensky 1998, 23*].

If nothing is stable, then nothing is self-explanatory. When we claim to have basic intuitions, whether of natural realities, logical principles or mystical presences, then these in themselves, because they are so singular, are mere contingencies, all of them just chance "facts" of one kind or another, left totally unexplained, whereas reason demands explanations. So if, on the one hand, rational certainty requires intuitions, sheer unmediated stopping-points, it equally

13. [*Florensky 1998, 106–123*]. See the Letter on "Doubt" for all that immediately follows in the main text and in addition the Letter on Contradiction.

14. For the epistemology and ontology of predication or "propositionality", see: [*Bulgakov*] and [*Milbank 2020b*].

requires mediation, a chain of requisite pre-conditions. Thus, reason must at once constantly halt and yet can never halt: it must look only to self-sufficient atoms, but must also place them in a linked sequence.

This can already start to look contradictory. But when we come to consider merely mediation and sufficient explanation, taken alone, then Florensky insists that that process in itself goes on forever, such that without any final stopping point, there can be no legitimate explanation at all.

Like Kant, whom he echoes, he consequently agrees that immediate intuitions without conceptualisation are “blind”, but that concepts without intuitions are empty. But unlike Kant, he is arguing that this situation is irremediable, and applies even if we try to bring the two together: for reason always need a further halt in seemingly arbitrary intuition, and then a further appeal to absent mediating cause, and we are stuck in a bad spiral. Kant’s “transcendental object”, supposed to be the binding of thought with sense, turns out never to be stably available and so to be perhaps a mere phantom of our rationalising supposition.

For this reason, while Florensky salutes Kant for himself realising that antinomy applies at the margin of the finite — for example, the universe both has to have a limit and yet it cannot — he convicts him of not realising that similar antinomies prevent any certain knowledge of finite things either.

In the wake of Vladimir Solovyov, and along with Russian symbolism in general, Florensky made the metacritical move of insisting that, since we cannot know either the finite or the infinite, we can only have any truth whatsoever beyond scepticism (which also negates itself by reflexively doubting even its own *scepsis*, as it must), if we participate in the infinite in some alternative existential, mystical, poetic or religious fashion. This can affirm in a different way the veracity of everything, the One and the many, or the Trinitarian One-All, that Solovyov identified with *Sophia*, the personified wisdom of the Bible¹⁵.

Essentially, this meant that scepticism was to be overcome with a Romantic mode of Platonism or Neoplatonism, and another way in which Florensky reads like a contemporary is his sophisticated account of Plato as a thoroughly antinomic, and essentially religious thinker, who insisted upon plurality as much as upon unity, and upon the limited reality of matter as much as upon the full reality of spirit¹⁶.

15. See: [Florensky 1998, 39–52; Solovyov 1995, 73–95].

16. See: [Florensky 2020, 3–32].

In a different respect, also, Florensky was faithfully Platonic and Socratic. Every attempted explanation is a dialectical judgement and any judgement, like any intuition, is merely contingent, in this case because provisional. “A is said to be B”, but it conceivably might not be so said or so found to be. The terms of any possible judgement can always fly apart, unless it is a mere tautology¹⁷.

To avoid this, we seek for some sort of inherent bond or linkage, beyond either tautology or a nominalist accidental conjuncture, whether of things or of theoretical statements. But like F. H. Bradley, their Oxford contemporary, the Russians, such as Florensky and his friends like Nikolai Lossky and Andrey Bely, and followers such as Alexei Losev, realised that linkage implies an infinite regress: what links the link to the two original poles and so on, forever¹⁸?

This can only be prevented if that which connects anything is a real form, participating in an eternal form, since the regress-principle implies that it cannot be finitely or temporally grounded. As Bely put it:

If we reject any kind of psychologism from the content of a judgement, we find ourselves obliged to assert something equivalent to the being of our judgements as their form. Transcendental logic at this point in its investigation begins to appear as a kind of organism that creates being itself [Bely 1985b, 182].

Despite his attraction to the *a prioristic* neo-Kantianism of Hermann Cohen, and refusal of psychologism as mere empiricist subjectivism, Bely was indicating here, in a more Romantically realist fashion, that the creative imagination of symbols intuits something of the eternally “formal”, which he understood ambiguously to be the “eternally symbolic”, but which Florensky construed as the “Word” character of the eternally formal within the Divine Trinity.

In all of the above ways, Florensky denied to rationalism its principles of identity and sufficient reason. Yet we misunderstand his undoubted debt to his enemy-friend Leibniz, if we do not realise that he wishes to salvage them in the end, by way of a metaphysical faith; his early *magnum opus*, *The Pillar and Ground of Truth*, is after all subtitled, in a nod to Leibniz, “An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy” [Florensky 1998, 1].

The same applies to the Leibnizian notion of unbroken *continuity*, that Florensky sees as the very core of modern thought, which

17. See: [Florensky 1998, 27–33].

18. See, for example: [Bely 1985b, 111–197] and [Florensky 1998, 53–79].

he somewhat misdescribes as “Renaissance” rather than “Classical” (as with the Anti-Renaissance Descartes), since his own thinking is really in the line of the early Renaissance, logically antinomian Cusanus, whom he sometimes cites [*Florensky 1998, 116, 431*]. What he admires in the Middle Ages, as with Dante, is in reality Humanist currents that are already of a “Renaissance” character. What he plausibly dislikes in the later Renaissance are those aesthetic aspects which took a rationalising and subjectivist approach to visual perspective, suppressing the importance of objective form, and so opening the way for a mechanistic suppression of the role of form and substance within natural philosophy [*Florensky 2002; Florensky 1996*]¹⁹. But as with Cusa, such an outlook was not the only one within this period, any more than the mechanical philosophy later had it all its own way during the “Scientific revolution”²⁰.

This terminological issue does not in the end matter. What is important, is Florensky’s plausible contention that Nineteenth century thinking disturbed any assumption that reality is “unbroken” and revealed instead a “wonderland”, as Lewis Carroll, also discussed by Florensky, intimated [*Florensky 2021, 355–358*].

He interpreted Cantor’s definition of number in terms of “set”, or of a collection of items, as disturbing the ordinal definition of number in terms of consecutive position on a line. Furthermore, along with several other Russians mathematicians, and in anticipation of Kurt Gödel, he denied that the differently-sized actual infinite sets which Cantor had discovered could be themselves arranged in any “continuous” sequence, or in measurable succession to the inclusive set of all finite items. The constant “diagonal” escaping of a new number line from any attempted one-to-one matching of real (fractional) numbers to natural numbers in a square, and the equivalent excess of the “power-set” of all sub-sets of a set over the size of an original set, do not permit of any ordering of these surfeits in a regular succession. The inherently antinomous cannot be tamed, even by an asymptotic and probabilistic lure [*Florensky 2021; Graham, Kantor, 66–187*].

He also elaborated, with great technical proficiency, the ineliminable place of both irrational and imaginary numbers in all fields of mathematics, including geometry. In terms of physics, he realised

19. See: [*Hoff, 2007*]. As Hoff shows, Cusa also systematically celebrated reverse perspective, in which it is the iconicity of the painting that situates the spectator, rather than the other way round. For Florensky

this inversion corresponds to the breaking in of the symbolic upon reality.

20. See: [*Hoff 2013, 25–97*].

that its increased invocation of time rather than reversible spatial process did not favour the dominance of continuous process as opposed to spontaneous leaps towards new formations, implying that “form” always intervenes in mysterious and under-determined ways in the successive course of reality. As to biological evolution, he regarded it as implausible of Darwin to suppose that evolutionary change occurs through inevitable shifts determined by the accrual of numerous small increments, precisely and so infinitesimally “adjacent” to each other [Florensky 2014, 15–37, 43–53].

In general, all this amounts to a disturbing of the “calculus” mentality of both Leibniz and Newton: the notion that the gulf of the infinitesimal can be bridged by an ordered and unbroken chain. Florensky implicitly returns to Cusanus (already aware of the same mathematical problem of infinitesimals)²¹ in suggesting that it cannot be so bridged, and that reality, both material and ideal, as has been known ever since Pythagoras, involves extra-rational and incomprehensible leaps.

For him, as for Henri Bergson, this is evidence that the divinely creative force is immanently at work as shaping vitality. The coherent continuity of the world is real, but everything is held together by God, albeit (beyond Malebranche and Leibniz’s Baroque onto-theological notions of a direct divine intervention) by a participated mediation which he, like Solovyov, identifies as the world-soul, *Sophia*²².

As we have already seen, the Russian symbolists responded to a Nietzschean scepticism by an appeal to a renewed Platonism, which often included Perennialist and semi-Gnostic resonances. This fully applies to Florensky, and he loses some of his vital interest and relevance if one pretends otherwise.

Central to this sensibility, as exemplified especially by Florensky’s close friend, the great symbolist poet and novelist, Andrey Bely, was the notion of the *theurgic*, the higher-magical enticement of the divine through symbolic right-attunement²³.

Rituals, and the gods they invoke, are all human creations, even though it is this very creation of the divine that renders us human. Again, partly in the wake of Nietzsche and his central attention to tragedy as ritual, Bely and others argued that all language is metaphorical and that the gods are born from the symbolic fusion of two poles of a metaphor, as when the “hornèd moon” becomes a horned divinity²⁴.

21. See: [Hoff 2013, 65–66, 165].

22. See: [Florensky 1998, 231–283].

23. See: [Bely 1985a].

24. See: [Bely 1985a, 93–110].

Whether this renders symbols or real gods transcendently supreme is ambivalent in Bely, but not so in Florensky. For him, our power to shape religious symbols is our supremely creative act only because it is the working through us and through nature of the divine creative power itself, which ultimately seeks to “deify” human beings and all of the cosmos: this being, after Bely, the Christian truth of the Nietzschean “overman” and of his “eternal recurrence”, since the straight line of history is nothing other in the end than the circle of return to the absolute.

Thus, if deification, following Solovyov and others, has been rethought in more worldly-engaged and less ascetic terms of human ethical and artistic action, conversely the latter are to be rethought in mystical terms as engaging the “empyrean”:

Beyond the given front plane of the empirical, there are other planes, other layers. They are not reducible to each other, but are connected by *correspondences*, which are not conditional elements imposed upon reality; these correspondences are established by the same act which produced “reality” in the form in which it is represented [Florensky 2017, 53].

Outside the delusory, over-subjectivist framework of epistemology, our ethical, aesthetic and mystical insights are just as synergically co-produced by the inherent link between the physical world and our mind as is our everyday reality of the flatly objective and pragmatic. Through our imaginative endeavours we at once make and discover a symbolic web of equivalences that subtly connects the physical, the dream-like, the musical, the iconic, the linguistic, and the conceptually abstract.

What is more, the concrete character of the symbol, as opposed to a theoretical abstraction, is not a sign of its mythic unreality, but rather of the truth (as perhaps also for Bely) that the transcendent is in itself super-symbolic, both more concrete and more plural than anything we find in the temporal and finite world.

In both respects, Florensky prodigiously restored a true sense of the Platonic and perennial mentality: spirit is not more ethereal than matter, but more solidly impermeable, and the simple and united that stands seemingly at the outset of any process is not like a single, empty unit, but is already eminently and plenitudinously plural.

These considerations are especially important for Florensky’s elucidation of notions of the *genus*, or of the idea [Florensky 2020, 65–66]. A *genus* already possesses in itself a face or an iconicity, such that the Platonic and neoplatonic “Ideas” remained close to deities. The idea,

“kind”, “type” or *genus* is not more proximate to the general than to the particular, as for Aristotle, since it is both generative of the latter and just as much present in the latter as it is in the initial abstractions. It is also fully present in the *formative* emergence of the particular from the “seed” of the original.

Thus, in a way that specifically builds up to a Trinitarian conception, the “essence” of anything transcends beginning, middle and end and the individual fully displays the idea of its species on its countenance: this being particularly true of the human face. General essence and individual “hypostasis” are in fact identical, and if the particular “person” is also in himself the essence, then inversely the generative essence is somehow in itself also supra-personal, or at least not impersonal — as more specifically elaborated by Bulgakov²⁵. It is in fact once more *Sophia*, which for Florensky is manifest in the created, human case as *Adam Kadmon*, the original, eternal and unfallen figure of united humanity, as found also in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa amongst the Church Fathers.

Florensky complained that modern thought cannot reach the absolute individual thing, which is always in some sense a person, since he takes “thing” to mean something approximating in a certain degree to personhood. Modernity wrongly characterises individuals in terms of shared properties and so of “resemblances”, obliterating their ineffable uniqueness — another mutated Leibnizian emphasis.

This predilection for “likeness” is, says Florensky, like that of the heretical Arians, who would not admit the full identity, or “consubstantiality” of the persons of the Trinity²⁶. That may seem odd, since he is insisting on the absolute Scotistic *haecceity* of things, but his point is that this only emerges, with complete paradox, when we think of things in their situated relationality, and so as totally “identifying” with what they nonetheless are not, in order to have an identity at all, through the bonds of love²⁷.

Exactly like Simone Weil and Maurice Blondel, Florensky thought that there was a connection between the Pythagoreans’ irrational leaps in mathematics and their extolling of human friendship as the crucial link binding the city together²⁸. It is as if personality emerges by grace, and beyond reason, through the clefts of reality, to form the only possible fully *actual* reality, which is the truth of love between persons in relation.

25. See: [Bulgakov].

26. See: [Florensky 1998, 60–67, 157, 194].

27. See: [Florensky 1998, 39–105].

28. See: [Gabellieri 2019, 129–171].

Irreducible individuality is, for Florensky, who thinks, after Pythagoras, that all reality is in some sense number, the individuality of number in *arithmetic*, as opposed to a posited algebraic identity in *logic*, since a number is absolutely irreplaceable and identifiable, yet only so because it is situated in a relational sequence: “Five for the symbols at your door/four for the gospel makers/three, three the rivals/two, two the lily-white boys, clothed all in green-o/One is one and all alone and evermore shall be so!” — and so forth, as the old song “Green grow the rushes O!” has it. In this sense, despite the fact that, for Florensky, each cardinal number succeeds its predecessor across the abyss of the infinitesimal real number line, nonetheless the inherently relational ordinality of number still matters for him: the number two is only two because it is *second* after the first (the number one) and comes precisely before the third (the number three) and so on. Indeed, since this succession is now a matter of ineffable leaps, ordinality assumes a more mystical valency.

At the same time, since Cantor had shown that we can create infinitely new numbers by *naming* them, in the way that Cantor gave exotic names like “Aleph-Zero” to his new sets, we can see that the very idea of number as an isolated and willed *collection* (even if it is also in a series, like the set of all finite integers or of all negative numbers) links number in some way to the sign. For this reason, there was an astonishing overlap in the Silver Age between the avant-garde mathematicians and the theurgic “name worshippers”, or devotees of the Jesus Prayer, often viewed askance or persecuted by the ecclesiastical authorities²⁹.

But no more that the invocation of the presence of Christ by uttering his name means that Christ is not real, does our creating of new numbers mean that they are not real. This, also, for Florensky, is an example of and witness to our participated co-creativity: our making of new images of God in time that is now, for the theurgic sophiologists, the central aspect of our deification and proves that we participate in the generative and creative action of God. We name new numbers, just as, one might say, the arch number, the plenitudinous One or Father, is named by the arch Symbol, who is the Son.

In general, and with respect to one of the two centres of his thought (the other being Sophiology), Florensky comprehends the participation of being and of our thought in transcendence in terms of a Trinitarian ontology.

29. See: [Nivière].

Understanding seeks, as we have seen, an impossible intuition-discursion, an unobtainable total coincidence of immediacy with mediation, whereby we could simultaneously see and explain the truth with intuited stable and self-identical sufficiency, fulfilling Leibniz after all. At the same time, it seeks to know how the irrational gaps are to be alternatively bridged.

As said, this is by interpersonal love which is alone truth. But we can only make philosophical sense of this circumstance in terms of the participation of both things and personal subjects in the transcendent One-All, as intimated by every true religion. This perennial metaphysics is at once more specifically spelt out and made more fully manifest as the Trinity through the Incarnation.

Now we see that God himself is substantive relation and so, beyond even the insight of the Church Fathers (who confined substantive relationality to God) that creatures, and especially spiritual creatures, are participated but fully realised substantive relations in all their particular erotic-agapeic commitments that together make up the Church, adding the quasi-sacrament of friendship to the sacrament of marriage. Our difference from God is simply that he encompasses every possible substantive relationship, exhaustively³⁰.

Within substantive relationship, both divine and created, intuition is at once discursion, and vice-versa. The immediate is likewise mediate and vice-versa. Human beings can cleave to truth, only because we now receive in due measure the infinite reality of everything and can share in it. And, additionally, because God knows himself and kenotically completes his self-knowledge by knowing himself also through us and our finitude [Florensky 1998, 237].

However, Florensky sees that a mere dyad collapses back into individual substance and so into nothingness, just by force of this perfect coincidence. He realises that the only irreducible substantial and so absolute relation is a *mediated* one, such that A can only reach C by way of B, and so on, in different permutations, as we see with processes of grammatical semiosis, formal logic and gift-exchange. A pure dyadic relation is a single blur, but a triadic relation can never be blurred unless its relationality be denied [Florensky 1998, 36–37]. It follows that “the Subject of the Truth is a relationship of the Three, but this is a relationship that is a substance, a relationship-substance” that in God is his very essence [Florensky 1998, 37].

30. See: [Florensky 1998, 39–105].

But how can this metaphysical picture hold true, if we have already declared that mediation is not other than immediacy, and if we know that there is no independent continuum? How can there then be mediation by a third moment, or any essence distinguishable from the moments?

Florensky's answer is that the true infinite and essential "sophianic" mediation itself also constitutes a personal figure, as shown by the Trinity, where we can envisage it as being alternatively the Son or the Holy Spirit³¹. In a "rational" sense, the persons of the Trinity are absolutely discontinuous with each other, because there is no emanative "continuum" between them, as the Arians, those adepts of mere "likeness", supposed. Instead, the absolute gulf between the persons is bridged immediately by pure love and mutual self-sacrifice without reserve. The "relationship-substance" that is the essence is not in any way other than the relationship-substance of the hypostases.

However, within this immediacy of pure mediation, a third moment of such mediated immediacy, especially expressive of this essence is nonetheless crucial if we are to prevent a mere shared narcissism. In finite terms, the infinite personal mediation of *Logos* in the Trinity is evidenced by the irreducibility of emergent new form to foregoing generative process, which is never able fully to anticipate its "overtaking" of process in an always new and unique guise [*Florensky 1998, 80–105*].

Yet even within a human dyad, according to Florensky, I know in myself the other, love him as myself, but also see in his still independent selfhood a *beauty*, such that he is already for me an objective "He" as well as being a "Thou". Implicitly, this opens the dyad out to a third person who can recognise either of us as a "He" and enter into new dyadic relations with either of us [*Florensky 1998, 37*]. In consequence, the personal mediation of "the Comforter" who is the Holy Spirit and our ecclesial sharing in the work of the Spirit is central for Florensky³².

He was criticised by Georges Florovsky for an under-developed Christology, and this is to a degree a fair judgement³³. Yet his Christology is expressed as his Sophiology and this is also crucial for his account of truth and identity.

On the Trinitarian plane, relation turns out to be substance and paradoxically to secure absolute numerical identity: the icon of personhood emerges from the generation of the Son from the Father and the personal Love of the Spirit as both bond and potential emerges

31. See: [*Florensky 1998, 39–52*].

32. See: [*Florensky 1998, 80–105*].

33. See: [*Gustafson*].

from the procession from the Father through the iconic Son. The divine essence is nothing but this “sophianic”, personalising process.

But on the Christological plane (including the eucharistic plane, as more brought out by Leibniz, and Blondel in his wake)³⁴, substance, or hypostasis, turns out to be relation total coincidence, such that what holds the God-Man Christ personally together is the ineffable sophianic bond that impossibly fuses divine infinite with finite human essence, while entirely sustaining their incommensurable difference. This bond can only be manifest iconically as the “character” of Christ’s refulgent but elusive divine-human personality which illuminates and shines out within all that exists.

More precisely, this bond is one of the divine *Logos* with the earthly, created Sophia, which is equivalent to Eriugena’s “created God”: the eternal core of the Creation, which can never not have been, since it is God himself in his omnipresent outgoing. At the same time, it is the first, noetic stage of creation, the angelic stage, of which many of the Church Fathers (including Augustine) spoke, and through which alone the material creation emerges, since God must emanate outwards first as what is closest in nature to himself and what is consciously able to comprehend, in gratitude, the core of Creation as gift³⁵.

But all this crucially implies other things in addition for Florensky: the created Sophia, although she is in a sense the fourth hypostasis that is truly added to the Trinity as the needed ground of our deification (though never hierarchically equal to them), is also inherently plural, as the many spiritual thoughts of God that were discussed by the Fathers, both East and West, and later by Leibniz. These are the *logoi*, “seeds”, seminal reasons, or Leibnizian “monads” behind everything, since material things are at their heart entirely spiritual, just as conversely all spiritual things possess a subtle body in some sense — and even God, for Florensky, like the Cambridge Platonist Henry More (whom he cites), is spiritually extended as ethereal light in the empyrean³⁶.

Sophia is also the eternal pre-created Church, the heavenly Jerusalem which will descend at the eschatological end of finite time and space. As the Church, she is likewise Mary, who inexplicably gave birth to the eternal God, in the supreme consummation of the mighty theurgic acts of Israel, which was, for Florensky (perhaps more philo-semitic than Bulgakov) by both culture and biological inheritance, the most god-bearing race. Her immaculate flesh in Christ is also purely

34. See: [Blondel].

35. See: [Milbank 2020a, 3–56].

36. See: [Florensky 1998, 231–283]. See the same letter on “Sophia” for the immediately following in the main text.

Sophia, now entirely unfallen, unlike her perverse sister, Maya, as invoked by Solovyov, the distortedly hypostatic disunity of all of fallen nature, who must be rescued from sin.

This Sophia that is Christ's humanity is thereby all of nature and all of human nature, the eternal Adam Kadmon, which for Florensky, a precise reader of St Paul, pre-existed the historical divine Incarnation as much as did the divine *Logos* *¹. The Incarnation both brings about, as an event, and manifests as eternal, the plenitude of truth: the One-All which fully includes the All or Many as also divine (at once within and outside the Trinity) and which, in some mysterious way, as both manifest and accomplished on the cross, undergoes the impenetrably dark mystery of its lapse and restores it.

*¹ Col 1:15;
Phil 2:5–10;
1 Cor 15:22

For this reason, truth as only and exhaustively the sharing in eternal love is also the assertion of finite joy and the undergoing of a passage through finite suffering and tragedy. All this must be theurgically re-enacted in the liturgy and lived out through a truly post-bourgeois politics that denies the primacy of the ego, the concealed heart of rationalistic pride.

If the Trinitarian insight that relation is substance tends to show that we can only realise the truth through a network of human relationships, then the Christological insight that substance is entirely overlapping relation of opposite essences tends to show that we must equally realise the truth as individual and collective expressive self-creation. The latter is, for Florensky, the only channel by which any finite reality receives grace — religious grace which is also aesthetic grace — while, conversely, no finite reality can exist without grace, since nothing holds together according to finite sound reason or merely finite forces.

This means living “in the fourth dimension”. With ambivalent admiration for both Picasso and Bergson, Florensky respectively agrees with them that we must somehow seek to see all spatial aspects of a thing at once, and that we must synthesise intuitively through time the changing facets of our individual and cultural personalities³⁷. Measurable time may be relative to space, and the universe we know bounded, but unfolding absolute irreversible and discontinuous time exceeds spatialised fixity and begins, as Christ fully achieved, to coincide with the different duration of the eternal body of God that is at one with his spatiality. This has to be the real goal of a modernist and symbolic art

37. See: [Florensky 2020, 49–63].

that is now entirely at one with life and religion, as it aspires to be, although it has missed the Orthodox key to that achievement.

During the Soviet exile, apart from Berdyaev and Bulgakov, the exotic speculations of the Silver Age eventually fell out of favour, as seeming all too near the mystical materialism of the Bolsheviks in their utopian and eschatological character.

But today, once more, liberal rationalism seems to be delivering only human inequality, routinisation and misery, besides the destruction of the sacred earth. Meanwhile, it seems that the messianic Spirit of Russian Eurasianism never dies and now threatens a decadent West in all too barbarous and Nietzschean a form.

Do we not now need, both East and West, and globally, during the reign of a new British king with a self-proclaimed world-reach, a Perennialist vision and an Orthodox Paternal legacy, to revisit the more generous and coherent versions of this tradition, as so supremely exemplified by Pavel Florensky? For he only doubted the criteria of reason, in order, through Christian faith and practice, to save their appearances.

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The article was received by the editors on December 3, 2022; approved after review on June 4, 2023; accepted for publication on July 24, 2023.