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Pavel Florensky: The Pillar and Ground of the Truth

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INTRODUCTION TO THE TRANSLATION
BY RICHARD F. GUSTAFSON



RUSSIAN religious thought is a unique modern expression of the Eastern Christian worldview. It came of age early in the twentieth century, in a period now referred to as the “Russian religious renaissance” and is known to the West mainly in the works of Nikolai Berdiaev and Leon Shestov. The roots of modern Russian religious philosophy can be traced to the nationalist debates about Russia and its world-historical cultural mission in the mid-nineteenth century. The Westernizers, following the lead of Peter the Great, argued that Russia’s future lay in an alliance with the West. They were challenged by the Slavophiles, who claimed that Russia’s unique social and religious experience not only shaped its past but destined its future. One of the early prominent Slavophile thinkers, Ivan Kireevsky (1806–1856), called for the creation of a modern Russian philosophy which would use as a “convenient point of departure” the then fashionable German idealist philosophy of Schelling and Hegel, but corrected by the “basic principles of ancient Russian culture.”¹

Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900) took up Kireevsky’s directive; his philosophy of “total unity” and his theology of Godmanhood are the culmination of this nineteenth-century Russian philosophical endeavor and the intellectual foundation on which the religious renaissance rested. As with Solovyov, this return to religious roots was a decided reaction against the prevailing positivism of the times and for some a movement “from Marxism to idealism.” But this idealism tended to lose sight of Kireevsky’s basic principles of ancient Russian culture. Father Pavel Florensky (1882–1937) regrounded the philosophical endeavor on these basic principles, and his unique book *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* (1914) became a seminal work for the new Russian Orthodox philosophy.

Florensky, a polymath and renaissance man, was born in Azerbaijan and lived most of his early years in Tbilisi, Georgia. He claimed that the mountainous Trans-Caucasian environment shaped his way of thinking. His mother was Armenian and his father Russian. From his mother’s line he believed he inherited his artistic tendencies, while from his father, a railroad engineer descended from the clergy, both his scientific and religious interests.² In later years he imagined his childhood days as an

¹ James M. Edie, James P. Scanlan, and Mary-Barbara Zeldin, eds., *Russian Philosophy* (Chicago, 1965), I, 213.

² Pavel Florensky, *Detiam moim, Vospominaniia proshlykh dnei* (Moscow, 1992), 413–415. Future references to this volume (identified as DM) will be given parenthetically in the text.

Edenic paradise now lost and asserted that “the child has absolutely precise metaphysical formulas for everything other-worldly, and the sharper his sense of Edenic life, the more defined is his knowledge of these formulas” (DM, 74). His memoirs record many moments of his “direct contemplation of Nature’s countenance” (DM, 75) when he felt himself “face to face with the native, solitary, mysterious and infinite Eternity, from which everything flows and to which everything returns” (DM, 50). These childhood moments of “ecstasy” with their sense of “magic” gave him “an objective, noncentripetal perception of the world, a kind of inverse perspective” which allowed for a “penetration into the depth of things” (DM, 438–39). In school, however, Pavel turned from this childhood mysticism toward the sciences and their laws, a scholarly interest that he maintained throughout his life. “The mystery I kept within myself, the laws were proclaimed for myself and others” (DM, 190). The decisive moment came in the summer of 1899, when Florensky, reared in a home without religion, had a metaphysical dream of existential darkness and meaninglessness through which he heard or saw the name of God. When later he heard a voice call out his name, he became convinced of the “ontologicalness of the spiritual world” (DM, 215–16).

Florensky’s adult life was shaped by this dichotomous lure of mystical intuition and the laws of science. In the fall of 1899 he entered Moscow University, where he studied mathematics with the noted mathematician N. V. Bugaev (1837–1903) and philosophy with S. N. Trubetskoi (1862–1905) and L. M. Lopatin (1855–1920). In 1904 he rejected a research fellowship for advanced work in mathematics to enroll in the Moscow Theological Academy, and in 1911 he was ordained to the priesthood. *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* grew out of his candidate’s thesis, “On Religious Truth” (1908) and his Master’s dissertation, “On Spiritual Truth” (1912). Upon graduation Florensky joined the faculty, where he taught until the closing of the Academy after the revolution. In these years he also served as editor of the important *Bogoslovskii vestnik* (*Theological Herald*) and wrote numerous articles on mathematics and the philosophy of language, as well as theology, some of which remained unpublished.

After the revolution Florensky redirected his scholarly activity. He developed his interest in art history, wrote a book on the analysis of space in art and a seminal study on icons, and taught the theory of perspective at the State Higher Technical-Artistic Studios (VKHUTEMAS). He also pursued research in physics and electrical engineering, worked for the Commission for the Electrification of Soviet Russia, and served as an editor of the Soviet *Technical Encyclopedia*, to which he contributed many articles. In 1927 he invented a noncoagulating machine oil, which the Soviets called “dekanite” in commemoration of the Bolshevik Revolution. His book on dielectrics became a standard textbook. Throughout

this period he remained a priest and appeared at government offices in his cassock. Arrested briefly in 1928, Florensky managed to pursue his scholarly activities until 1933, when the Soviet government sentenced him to ten years of corrective labor in Siberia. At various camps he continued his scientific work and ministered to his fellow prisoners. On August 8, 1937, he was executed. Florensky was rehabilitated in 1956 and then was slowly rediscovered, first mainly as a philosopher of language and culture of interest to Soviet semiotics. In post-Communist Russia he has re-emerged as a seminal philosopher and theologian and become a major symbolic figure in the back-to-roots movement.

Florensky must be seen first of all, however, as a man of his era. He arrived in Moscow in 1899 at age seventeen, in time to experience the growth and flowering of Russian Symbolism. He befriended Andrei Bely (1880–1934), the son of his mathematics professor N. V. Bugaev, and Viacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949), a distinguished classics scholar, both of whom were important Symbolist poets and theoreticians. Florensky's first published review was of Bely's "Northern Symphonies," and Florensky himself published poems in the Symbolist Journal *Vesy* (*The Scales*). In his memoirs he claimed retrospectively, "I have always been a symbolist" (DM, 154).

Russian Symbolism, with its renewed concern with the significance of language and classical and medieval culture, its focus on intuitive knowledge, and its mystical apprehension of the divine root of reality couched in the language of Vladimir Solovyov, was seemingly made for Florensky, and his philosophical and theological work must be seen in the light of this important movement. With the Symbolists Florensky shares a "conception of the world and culture as a composition of symbols, turned both upward toward its original homeland and meaning and downward toward the fate of man in history."³ Florensky's fundamental conception of truth is constructed according to the Symbolist model of reality where all phenomena are reflections, emanations, or manifestations of the noumena and we are to move, in Viacheslav Ivanov's programmatic phrase, *de realibus ad realiora*. Florensky's ornate, metaphorical, and lyrical writing style, which Berdiaev dismissed as "stylized archaism" and decadent Alexandrianism, is characteristic of much Symbolist procedure.⁴ *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, which was conceived and written at the height of the movement, represents in style, structure, and worldview the most elaborated work of Russian Symbolist theology.

The Pillar and Ground of the Truth is constructed not as a philosophical treatise, but as a series of twelve letters addressed to an unidentified "brother," "friend," "elder," and "Guardian," who may be understood

³ K. G. Isupov, "Zhitie i mirosozertsanie Pavla Florenskogo," in Pavel Florensky, *Opravdanie kosmosa* (St. Petersburg, 1994), p. 6.

⁴ Nikolai Berdiaev, *Tipy religioznoi mysli v Rossii* (Paris, 1989), p. 544.

symbolically as Christ.⁵ Poetic moments describing the narrator's present sense of separation from this "far, yet eternally near friend" are sprinkled throughout the text, thus identifying the narrator's spiritual mood, which is his constant awareness of "two worlds" and his desire to reach out from this world to experience or touch the other world. Argument often yields to emotion, and logic to lyricism. The basic assumption is that "the philosophical creation of truth is closest to artistic creation." The narrator's "I" is not an "abstract, colorless, impersonal 'consciousness in general,'" Florensky insisted at the defense of his Master's dissertation, but "concretely general, symbolically personal," a "*methodological 'I'*" in dialogue with its addressee. The method is "dialectical," understood as an "ever growing ball of threads of contemplation, a clot of penetrations, ever congealing, ever intruding into the essence of the subject studied . . . , an aggregate of the processes of thought which 'mutually reinforce and justify each other.'" Furthermore, the dialectical development of this concrete, living narrator's thought cannot be linear or "presented as a single-voiced *melody* of discoveries," but resembles more a "*fabric* or lace, whose threads are woven into varied and complex patterns."⁶ Such a book, like any typical modernist text, cannot be read, but only reread.

In characteristic Symbolist fashion, Florensky stressed the aesthetic character of his own book. He carefully chose the illustrations, created a special typeface for it, and oversaw its production. "A book, as a whole, must itself be an artistic work and consequently have *its own* composition and *its own* construction," argued the professor of art history. "Its structure and external appearance must be determined first of all by its inner idea. Its dimensions, the character of its paper and cover, its typeface, its sectioning, the consistency in the use of various typefaces for the delineation of the parts, chapters, and paragraphs, the manner of opening and closing the various sections, the placing of charts, diagrams, tables, formulas, etc. all this has an expressive dimension" which when successful, "corresponds to the idea of the book itself."⁷ With its many illustrations, charts, tables, diagrams, formulas and sections in varying size script, not to mention its one thousand fifty-six footnotes and thirty addenda, what, we may ask, is the idea of *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* and how is it one aesthetic whole?

Florensky subtitles his book "An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy." His theodicy, however, is not a justification of the goodness of God in the face of evil, but of the divine Truth to be ascertained even in this sinful world.

⁵ The "elder" refers to Father Isidore of the Gethsemane Hermitage, whose holy life and wisdom were especially important to Florensky. The "friend" was Florensky's roommate at the academy, S. S. Troitsky, who later married Florensky's sister. See P. A. Florensky, *Stolp i utverzhdnie istiny* in two volumes (Moscow, 1990), 2, 829–30.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 823–26.

⁷ P. A. Florensky, *Analiz prostranstvennosti i vremeni v khudozhestvenno-izobrazitel'nykh proizvedeniakh* (Moscow, 1993), pp. 237–38.

This Truth is attained through our experience of “ecclesiality,” which is understood as the new life in the Spirit, experienced within Orthodoxy and represented ideally in the lives of the ascetics and elders in the monastic tradition. In modern Russia this tradition was renewed in the late eighteenth century through the revival of hesychast mysticism, a yoga-like form of meditative practice based on the silent recitation of the Jesus Prayer. The nineteenth century, which experienced an incredible growth in the monastic population, witnessed a creative encounter between the monasteries and the artists and intellectuals, reflected, for example, in the works of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. This encounter fostered a renewed interest in the culture of liturgy, icons, and patristics.

Florensky, who had himself wanted to become a monk, consciously grounds his whole book in this monastic sense of ecclesiality. The complex system of layers of text and additions to the text serves to create the sense of the depth of this tradition even as it recovers it and places it on a par with secular culture. One reason for the importance of *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* lies in its extensive reference to the patristic tradition and its creative reading of the liturgy, for these verbal creations best represent the basic principles of ancient Russian culture. Florensky, who preferred medieval culture to renaissance or modern, gives these verbal systems of symbols (as well as the iconographic ones) the same high regard Viacheslav Ivanov gave to classical Greek culture. While many editions of the Eastern Christian Fathers were newly translated and published in the nineteenth century, as Florensky’s notes testify, it was Florensky who was responsible for legitimizing their relevance to modern philosophical and theological discourse in Russia. Likewise, Florensky was the first to see the incredible resources that lay hidden in the rich and poetic Greek and Slavonic liturgical texts which he approached with Symbolist reverence. Liturgy, for Florensky, was the “heart of human activity,” for it expressed the two worlds, human and divine, of what he called *homo liturgus*.⁸ With the secularization of life, “cult,” Florensky believed, branched off into “culture,” whose activities are “secondary and express human nature one-sidedly.” With his firm belief that liturgy was humanity’s “primal activity” and his focus on the symbolic meaning of liturgical texts Florensky enabled the development of modern Orthodox liturgical theology.

The more massively and metaphysically crudely and archaically we conceive religious concepts, the more profound will the symbolism of their expression be and therefore the closer we will come to a genuine understanding of strictly religious experience. This compressed, densified character of religious concepts char-

⁸ “Iz bogoslovskogo nasledii sviashchenika Pavla Florenskogo,” in *Bogoslovskie trudy* 17 (1977), 107. This publication contains Florensky’s main liturgical studies, pp. 85–248.

acterizes our entire liturgy. . . . (PGT, 63) The liturgy is the flower of Church life and also its root and seed. What richness of ideas and new concepts in the domain of dogmatics, what abundance of profound psychological observations and moral guidance could be gathered here even by a not very diligent investigator! Yes, liturgical theology awaits its creator.⁹

Ecclesiality also means for Florensky the mystical life of the church. The Truth is attained in the ascetic's mystical experience of encounter with the "other world." Florensky had a special admiration for the humble purity and spiritual strength he saw in his own beloved elder, Abba Isidore, who "gave me the most solid, the most undeniable, the purest perception of a spiritual person I have had in my entire life." (PGT, 233). In 1908 he wrote a whole book about him.¹⁰ In characteristic Eastern Christian fashion, Florensky saw the ascetic virtues, especially chastity, aesthetically, and he related life in the Holy Spirit to the experience of beauty: "Ecclesiality is the beauty of new life in Absolute Beauty, in the Holy Spirit" (PGT, 234). This Divine Beauty, understood as order and wholeness, is at one with Truth and Goodness.¹¹ This Divine Truth, Beauty, and Goodness are revealed and manifested in Creation.

Ecclesiality also entails the dogmatic tradition of the church. The fundamental dogmatic premise of Florensky's theodicy (as of Solovyov's theology of Godmanhood) is that the Creator and Creation are one, as God and Man are one in Christ. The whole book can be considered an exploration of the epistemological, ontological, and moral implications of the two central Christian doctrines Florensky believed both symbolized the religious experience of medieval Kiev and Moscow and prophesied the "two fundamental ideas of the Russian spirit."¹² Florensky's theodicy rests on the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, understood as basic principles of ancient Russian culture.¹³

The first controlling idea of *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* is epistemological and is treated mainly in letters two, three, and six. In a

⁹ Pp. 63, 217–18 of this translation. Henceforth all references to the present translation of *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* will be designated as PGT and given (in parentheses) in the body of the text.

¹⁰ St. Paul Florensky, *Salt of the Earth: A Narrative on The Life of the Elder of Gethsemane Skete, Hieromonk Abba Isidore*, Palatine, California, 1987.

¹¹ On the aesthetic dimension of Florenskii's thought, see Victor Bychkov, *The Aesthetic Face of Being: Art in The Theology of Pavel Florenskii*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Crestwood, N.Y., 1993.

¹² See P. A. Florensky, "Troitse-Sergieva Lavra i Rossiia" in *Vestnik Russkogo Khristianskogo Dvizheniia*, No. 117, pp. 5–22. English translation by Robert Bird: *The Trinity St Sergius Lavra and Russia* (New Haven, 1995).

¹³ Father Georges Florovsky, who in general treats Florensky rather harshly, is in one sense quite correct to note that Florensky "by-passes the Incarnation" and gives us "no discussion of Christology." See his *Ways of Russian Theology*, trans. by R. L. Nichols (Belmont, 1987), II, 278. But it is also clear that Florensky considered the Incarnation a central doctrine, which he associated with Sophia (see below). In PGT the idea of the Incarnation, especially the notion of "consubstantiality," is of major importance.

fashion characteristic of the whole Slavophile tradition from Kireevsky on, Florensky grounds his theory of knowledge in an attack on “rationality.” In this tradition, Reason, understood as the processes of thought and the laws of logic, is considered the foundation of Western philosophy, with its roots in both Aristotle and Aquinas, its modern champion in Descartes, and its apotheosis in Hegel. Florensky, trained in logic and mathematics, attacks the logical laws of this rationality with impressive manipulations of symbolic logic. At bottom, however, his approach is Symbolist. The law of identity, $A = A$, is read as a sign of reality in a state of isolating sin: “This formula affirms in advance the separateness and egotistical isolation of the ultimate elements of being, thus rupturing all rational connection between them” (PGT, 22). Truth, he argues, is antinomial, to be represented as $A + (-A)$, and every singular truth is to be understood symbolically as a truth about the Truth, which can be experienced only “discontinuously.” Christian doctrine is seen as a web of antinomial statements about this Truth. Florensky’s characterization of this antinomial Truth seems to have captured something of the epistemological spirit of Orthodoxy, which is so grounded in apophatic theology. It may reflect Dostoevsky’s pro and contra and was certainly useful to later Russian religious thinkers, not the least significant of whom was Mikhail Bakhtin.¹⁴

This attitude to Western conceptions of rationality and logic is reflected in the structure of the book. Florensky claimed that his book was but “jottings, written at different times and in different moods” (PGT, 5). In fact throughout he had to deal with his firm belief that “the single and integral object of religious perception disintegrates in the domain of rationality into a multiplicity of aspects, into separate facets, into fragments of holiness” (PGT, 234). A rational system violates the one religious Truth. But without a system, “it is practically impossible to decide what should be said and what should not be said, what should be said first and what should be said after” (PGT, 234–35). In virtual despair he comes to the conclusion that “when a religious object enters the sphere of rationality, what is most appropriate is the conjunction ‘and’” (PGT, 235). This concern for appropriate form was shared by many of his fellow thinkers, who resolved it in various ways. Berdiaev’s style of fiery flow from the creative depths, Frank’s notion of philosophy as the rational transcendence of the limitations of rational thought, and Shestov’s whole mad imagined Borgesian universe peopled with the monstrous phrases of Western rationalism represent some of the solutions to this deep-seated cultural aversion to the logical ordering of discourse.¹⁵ Florensky’s mod-

¹⁴ On the relationship of Bakhtin and Florensky, see K. Clark and M. Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), pp. 135–37.

¹⁵ For other roots of this attitude, see A. D. Sukhov, “Russkaia filosofia kak istoricheskii tip: Protess stanovleniia,” in *Filosofia i kul'tura v Rossii: Metodologicheskie problemy* (Moscow, 1992), pp. 3–12.

ernist conception of the text as a fabric made from many interwoven strands is one of the more successful attempts among Russian religious thinkers to resolve the anxiety of genre that follows from their attack on rationality.

Florensky also argued that this Western rationality was a logic of things, of entities understood as dead and closed off one from another. His epistemology is an epistemology not of separate things, but of persons, who are understood to be “consubstantial” (Gr. *homoousios*, “of the same nature”). Consubstantiality is a complex notion, especially important in Eastern Christian thought. It surfaced in the early incarnational debates about the relationship of the human and the divine in Christ. At the Council of Chalcedon in 451 c.e. Christ’s consubstantiality with the Father in divinity and with us in humanity was affirmed; the union of Christ’s two natures was understood to be “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.”¹⁶ This conception of consubstantiality was later used to characterize the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity, who were understood to be of the same nature. The first and last of the four apophatic definitions later traveled from the doctrinal statement into the liturgy, which then popularized this conception of a union that is “not separate” and “not merged.” Florensky develops his whole theory of Truth from this “antinomian seed of Christian life-understanding:”

[Consubstantiality] expressed not only a christological dogma but also a spiritual evaluation of the rational laws of thought. Here rationality was given a death blow. Here for the first time a new principle of the reason’s activity was proclaimed *urbi et orbi*. (PGT, 41)

Furthermore this doctrine of unity in separation grounds Florensky’s firm belief that

the act of knowing is not only a gnoseological but also an ontological act, not only ideal but also real. Knowing is a real *going* of the knower *out* of himself, or (what is the same thing) a real *going* of what is known *into* the knower, a real unification of the knower and what is known. That is the fundamental and characteristic proposition of Russian and, in general, of all Eastern philosophy. (PGT, 55)

This conception of knowing, which is actually borrowed from the intuitionist epistemology of Nikolai Lossky (1870–1965), is a form of loving. It is understood as a process of mutual self-emptying and results in a “living moral communion of persons, each serving for each as both object and subject.” The epistemological and moral moments are ontological and

¹⁶ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York, 1978), pp. 338–43.

share the same structure. To know the Truth, furthermore, entails a “real entering into the interior of the Divine Tri-Unity,” which is possible “only through the transubstantiation of man, through his deification, through the acquisition of love as the Divine essence. . . . In love, and only in love is real knowledge of the Truth conceivable” (PGT, 56). At root Florensky’s theory of knowledge rests on the ancient Eastern Christian conception of salvation as deification, the restoration of fallen humanity to the image and likeness of God. Rational knowledge, knowledge of things, is fallen knowledge, what Berdiaev would call “objectification.” Real knowledge, knowledge of persons, comes with love. Knowledge of God comes to the saintly, spiritual souls like Abba Isidore, who love God. Florensky’s whole epistemological position strikingly prefigures Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and his conception of identity as “belonging together.”¹⁷

The second controlling idea of *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* is moral and is explored mainly in letters four, eleven, and twelve. It focuses on mutual relationships between human beings and between humanity and God, understood subjectively and metaphysically. The Goodness of these relationships rests on what is called love. This love is modeled after the Incarnation and is imagined as a process of kenosis, of self-emptying. “The metaphysical nature of love lies in the supralogical overcoming of the naked self-identity ‘I = I’ and in the going out of oneself” (PGT, 67). This metaphysical conception prefigures the “actual entities” of Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) by some fifteen years.¹⁸ Florensky understands this metaphysically realized self as an action whereby “I transcends itself, the norm of its own being, and voluntarily submits to a new image so as thereby to incorporate its own I in the I of another being which for it is not-I.” This process, understood mutually, simultaneously transforms the I from a self-enclosed entity into its true state of transcendence and the other from an objective not-I into a person. Furthermore from God’s point of view, Florensky believes

[that this] whole process of the interrelation of the lovers is a single act, in which an infinite series of individual moments of love is synthesized. This single, eternal, and infinite act is the consubstantiality of the lovers in God, where I is one and the same as the other I, but also different. (PGT, 68)

This conception of true self as a self-transcending entity, ever reaching out to and receiving the other, of true love as a metaphysical moment of consubstantiality in God, and of true life as the synthesis of all human love is

¹⁷ Robert Slesinski, *Pavel Florensky: A Metaphysics of Love* (Crestwood, N.Y., 1984), p. 115. This book is an excellent study of Florensky, with special attention to the philosophical and theological issues in *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 116–18.

characteristic of such different Russian thinkers as Solovyov and Tolstoy.¹⁹ What is different in Florensky is his attempt, not always clear in my view, to ground this metaphysical conception of love in the doctrine of the Trinity, read in Hegelian fashion as a triadic opposition of self and other.

Florensky's most controversial theological teaching is his notion of love as friendship, the lyrical center and culminating idea of the book. The basic idea, characteristically antinomian and ambiguous, is that "to live among brothers, it is necessary to have a Friend, if only a distant one" and that "to have a Friend, it is necessary to live among brothers, at least to be with them in spirit" (PGT, 297). Christian love is an antinomian combination of *philia* (friendship) and *agapē*, and in the "friendly, philic structure of the brotherly, agapic community of Christians . . . the limit to fragmentation is not the human atom that from itself relates to the community, but a community molecule, a pair of friends, which is the principle of actions here, just as the family was this kind of molecule for the pagan community" (PGT, 301). This consubstantial dyad, gathered in Christ's name, is transformed into a new "spiritual essence, a particle of the Body of Christ, a living incarnation of the Church" (PGT, 303).

To bolster his argument for this dyad Florensky recalls the pairing of the Apostles in the gospels and of saints in hagiography and iconography. And in the "gracious office" of the "half-ecclesiastical, half popular" rite of *adelphopoiesis* (Russ. *bratotvorenie* and *pobratimstvo*), for which he gives a detailed bibliographical note, he finds the appropriate liturgical expression of philic love, just as in the general communal liturgy he sees the appropriate expression of agapic love (PGT, 328–30). Sanctified thus in the liturgy, friendship becomes an essential element of ecclesiality. It is important to note that in this notion of friendship the significance of the structure of addressed letters for the main idea of *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* becomes clear; the whole work in one way or another is about this need for a friend in a world of brothers, of Christian philic life in the Christian agapic community.

In his discussion of friendship Florensky also resorts to one of his favorite devices, argumentation from language. As a Symbolist thinker, Florensky believed that words had some inherent relationship to their referent. While he was aware of the newer philology which considered words as arbitrary signifiers unrelated to the signified, he considered it but a fashionable scientific theory and later wrote several important stud-

¹⁹ In his *Lectures on Godmanhood* Solovyov imagined all metaphysical entities as "mutually penetrating," each "mutually acting" on the other and "making room for" the other in itself. The totality of these entities is the "essence" of Christ, second person of the Trinity; with Creation this essence is embodied and with deification becomes the Body of Christ or the Church. For Tolstoy's understanding of metaphysical entities he calls "beings" and their relation to each other and the "All," see my *Leo Tolstoy, Resident and Stranger* (Princeton, 1986), 94–109; 449–455.

ies in philosophical linguistics in defense of his views.²⁰ In *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* he often explores an idea as expressed in various languages (he himself controlled all the European languages, classical and modern, as well as classical Hebrew and a few modern Caucasian and Central Asian languages). Several words for “truth,” for example, are considered in some detail, and each is understood as revealing an aspect of the Truth (PGT, 14–20). This same procedure is used for the word “love.” In his exploration of the four Greek words for love (*agapē*, *erlōs*, *philia*, and *storgē*), Florensky explores the various subjective and social experiences designated by the signs. But it is the Russian words for “friend” that are most useful to him. The word *priiatel*, which means both “friend” and “receiver” and is related to the notions of “agreeable” and “acceptable,” signifies that “between lovers the membrane of selfhood is torn,” because “the loved one . . . is received by his friend and nestles, like a mother’s child, beneath his heart” (PGT, 310). The most important linguistic argument in the book, however, comes from Florensky’s relating the phonetically similar, but etymologically unrelated words “friend” (*drug*) and “other” (*drugoi*). Throughout the book, in theme and structure, this bit of philosophical paranomasia takes on mythic proportions. All the quasi-Hegelian discussion of I and the other turns on this relationship. “Friendship” (*druzhba*) entails both the loss of self to the other and the discovery of self in the other: “The I, being reflected in a friend (*drug*), recognizes in the friend’s I its own other (*drugoe*) I” (PGT, 314). This other I is understood as the image of God, and Florensky can say that “friendship is the seeing of oneself with the eyes of another, but before a third, namely the Third.” It is “self-contemplation through a Friend in God.”

The notion of friendship is Florensky’s response to the general modern European reevaluation of love that emerged in Russia with the “woman question” of the mid-nineteenth century and flowered in the mysticism of eros in the Symbolist period. In mid-century Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828–89) argued in his novel *What Is To Be Done?* (1863) for a rational but sexual love freed from the strictures of marriage and dependence. Tolstoy, ever troubled by his own sexual urges, argued in *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1890) for the rejection of sexuality even in marriage. Solovyov in *The Meaning of Love* (1892–94) tried to restore meaning to sexuality by grounding it in a higher theological conception of the person as an androgynously interrelated male and female. Vasily Rozanov (1856–

²⁰ See “Nauka kak simvolicheskoe opisanie,” “Antinomiia iazyka,” “Stroenie slova,” and especially “Imeslavie kak filosofskaia predposylka” in P. A. Florensky, *U vodorazdelov mysli* (Moscow, 1990). For a picture of the complex state of late nineteenth-century philological study (more complex than Foucault presents it in *Les Mots et les choses*), see C. H. Plotkin, *The Tenth Muse: Victorian Philology and the Genesis of the Poetic Language of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Illinois, 1989), especially chapters two and three.

1919), a friend of Florensky's, preached a doctrine of divine sexuality to be realized in the bedrooms of bourgeois marriage. The Symbolist writers Dmitry Merezhkovsky (1865–1941) and his wife Zinaida Gippius (1869–1945) lived in a *ménage à trois*, which they believed was an embryonic church. The new visibility and sometimes tolerance, if not acceptance, of homosexuality, which was spawned by the late-nineteenth-century homosexual liberation movements in Germany, had a strong impact on Russian cultural life in the beginning of the twentieth century, and not a few of the poets and artists followed the ways of Tchaikovsky.

In this context Florensky's notion of friendship has a decided homoerotic, if not homoerotic, tinge. All dyadic friendships in his discussion are same-sex unions. And this is what is significant theologically, even for our own era.²¹ Florensky decenters heterosexual marriage in his presentation of ecclesiality in order to privilege pairs of friends. He moves the discussion of Christian life away from the union of the flesh to the union of the spirit. Marriage is understood as a remnant from pagan life, now blessed by the church; friendship is inherently Christian. To my knowledge, Florensky's *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* is the first Christian theology to place same-sex relationship at the center of its vision.

The third controlling idea of *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* is ontological; it is explored mainly in letters five, nine, and ten. For Florensky what truly and objectively is is God's original creation. And he hopes "to live and feel together with all creation, not with the creation that man has corrupted but with the creation that came out of the hands of its Creator; to see in this creation another, higher nature; [and] through the crust of sin, to feel the pure core of God's creation" (PGT, 192). This pure core of God's creation is what Florensky calls Sophia. The Old Testament concept of God's Wisdom (Hbr. *chochma*, Gr. *sophia*) was traditionally associated by Christianity with Christ. It was introduced into Russian religious philosophical discourse by Solovyov, who reread it as the "eternal feminine," of which he claimed to have had three visions. For the Symbolist poets, Bely, Ivanov, and especially Aleksandr Blok (1880–1921) this notion of Sophia as the eternal feminine proved productive for their poetry and their own mystical worldviews.

Florensky was the first Russian religious philosopher to develop Solovyov's idea. In characteristic fashion he redirected Solovyov's views, by placing them squarely in the church culture of liturgy and patristics. He also stressed the role of St. Sophia in the culture of Russia, pointing to the Kiev and Novgorod Cathedrals dedicated to her and the numerous icons depicting her. Historically, Florensky argued, the image of Sophia has

²¹ For a modern study of same-sex unions in early Christian culture, including an in-depth analysis of the liturgies of adelphopoiesis, written by a medievalist and social historian, the late and much missed John Boswell, see his *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York, 1994). Boswell was aware of Florensky's work.

surfaced at three different moments, in Greek patristics as an object of contemplation, in the Slavic medieval world as an emblem of chastity and spiritual perfection, and in modern Russia as a symbol of the unity of all creation, the mystical church (PGT, 282). With Solovyov and Florensky Sophia became the privileged image of God's original vision of Creation, which, although now fallen, is to be restored as the universal church. The doctrine of salvation as deification is redirected from the individual to the cosmos. Thus conceived by Solovyov and legitimized by Florensky, Sophia entered Russian religious philosophy, spawned a whole school of sophiology, and culminated in the systematic theology of Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944), the most complete and suggestive expression of Russian sophiological theology.

For Solovyov Sophia was the passive, receptive (hence feminine) partner of the active, energizing, and ordering Logos, and their union comprised the metaphysical Christ, the second person of the Trinity. In its original conception Creation was the Body of this Christ. The actual world came into being when Sophia broke away from this union with the Logos and thus fell into chaos and matter. The cosmogonic story in its evolutionary unfolding is a process of the reordering of this fallen Sophia by the Logos. Creation is a form of Incarnation and Transfiguration. Florensky, who holds firmly to the notion of creation *ex nihilo*, redirects attention from this near-gnostic story of Creation to its idea and vision. His Sophia is still passive and feminine, and like Solovyov he associates Sophia with the Logos; their union is conceived as the idea of the Incarnation ever-existing in the Trinitarian Godhead. For Florensky, therefore, Sophia is God's idea of and love for Creation. This Sophia, understood as the original nature of Creation, is imagined as a monad which is by God's condescension (and not by nature) a fourth person of the Trinity. Thus Sophia is the "Great Root by which creation goes into the intra-Trinitarian life and through which it receives Life Eternal from the One Source of Life" (PGT, 237).

While the designation of Sophia as a fourth hypostasis (albeit not by nature) was perhaps unfortunate and to some seemed heretical, Florensky succeeded more clearly than Solovyov in bringing the concept of Sophia into relationship with the whole Trinity. From the point of view of the theological Trinity *ad intra*, Sophia is the substance and power of being, the reason and meaning of being, and the purity and beauty of being; from the point of view of the economical Trinity *ad extra*, Sophia is the Body of Christ, The Church, The Virgin Mary. For Florensky these "separate aspects of faith disintegrate atomistically only for scholastic theology, but, in living life, these aspects, each retaining its independence, become so closely interwoven that one idea imperceptively evokes another" (PGT, 243–44). And "the speech of faith . . . clothes its knowledge of dogmatic truth in a symbolic garment, in figurative language, which

covers the higher truth and depth of contemplation in consistent contradictions” (PGT, 244). Florensky’s Sophia stands next to friendship as a controlling symbol of his whole vision.

If Sophia is all of Creation, then the soul and conscience of Creation, Mankind, is Sophia *par excellence*. If Sophia is all of Mankind, then the soul and conscience of Mankind, the Church, is Sophia *par excellence*. If Sophia is the Church, then the soul and conscience of the Church, the Church of the Saints, is Sophia *par excellence*. If Sophia is the Church of the Saints, then the soul and conscience of the Church of Saints, the Intecessor for and Defender of creation before the Word of God, Who judges creation and divides it in two, the Mother of God, “Purifier of the World,” is, once again, Sophia *par excellence*. But the true sign of Mary Full of Grace is Her Virginity, the beauty of Her soul. This is precisely Sophia. (PGT, 253)

The qualities most commonly associated with Sophia are virginity, chastity, purity, beauty, and wholeness, the signs of ecclesiality. They are the marks of the original creation, and hence the ideals that all creation should seek to restore. For Florensky, these qualities, which are at root aesthetic, are attained through the ascetic life, especially as he saw it in his beloved Abba Isidore. “The goal of the ascetic’s strivings is to perceive *all* of Creation in its original triumphant beauty. The Holy Spirit reveals itself in the ability to see the beauty of creation” (PGT, 226). The *vitae* of the ascetic saints, Florensky observes, often “depict the life of the saint in the midst of nature, ‘with beasts,’” because they “express the whole essence of a new, reconciled, restored life together with all of creation” (PGT, 222). It is this cosmic vision of nature transformed that seems most appropriate for our world today. Sophia is the great symbol of ecological vision, the sign of hope that we can, with God’s grace, work to restore that original purity, beauty, and wholeness that marked our paradise. Sophia is also a feminine symbol, in the Christian tradition the most consistent image of the female aspect of the Divine. While Florensky’s ethical sympathies seem to lie more with his homophilic conception of friendship, his aesthetic and mystical conception of Sophia should be suggestive for the developing feminist restructuring of Christian theology.²²

To reduce Florensky’s book to an outline of its fundamental themes, however, may well do it a great disservice. *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* is, to be sure, a strange and difficult work. It can be academically obsessive and pretentious. It is at times philosophically abstract and at

²² See Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York, 1983) and Sally McFague, *The Body of God, An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, 1993) for significant studies in this area, with extensive bibliographies.

times poetically lyrical. It attempts to appeal almost simultaneously to the intellect, the will, and the heart. It meanders and repeats, it teaches and exhorts, it preaches and prays. Yet, while this book may try Western readers' patience from time to time, it will also trace anew their steps along familiar paths and lead them down roads less traveled. The ultimate value of *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* rests in the quality of its cosmic vision of love and the richness of its variegated texture. It is this vision and texture that come from the heart of the culture of Russian Orthodoxy.²³

²³ For further assessments of Florensky, see N. O. Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy* (New York, 1951), pp. 176–191 and V. V. Zenkovsky, trans. George L. Kline, *A History of Russian Philosophy* (New York and London, 1953), II, 875–890.

