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Pavel Florenskij: An Overcome Tragedy

Introduction to the Philosophy of the
Russian Leonardo da Vinci



Pavel Florenskij (1882-1937), possibly the greatest polymath of the twentieth century, was born and raised in the Caucasus region. His father's pure scientific zeal coupled with his mother's artistic inclinations made of Florenskij a true genius able to navigate easily in mathematics, chemistry, physics, engineering, and geology, as well as philosophy, philology, etymology, aesthetics, musicology, literature, theology, mysticism, and quite a number of world languages.

Having discovered at quite a tender age that a certain Mystery lies hidden in Nature, which man must inevitably "contemplate" and not "deduce", Florenskij comes to speak of this Mystery as the "life of the world". Indeed, for Florenskij Reality is made up of "two worlds": the invisible, abstract one and the visible, concrete one. He considered it his mission to seek to understand more the relationship between these two worlds not as "mimesis" but as "synopsis", quite like Plato's *Timaeus*. In fact, he sees humanity's journey on earth as one on the "confines" between these two worlds. And this sense of living between two worlds leads him to understand Reality through the lens of "antinomy" or "contradiction". Truth, for Florenskij, is the togetherness of thesis and antithesis; it isn't necessarily a synthesis of both. He recognises that this view finds its roots in Classical Philosophy. He renames this "concrete metaphysics".

Allowing himself to delve into most spheres of human knowledge, Florenskij seeks, in fact, to create a new "wholesome" vision of the world, which he calls "mystical". Whether it be language, culture, space and time, geometry, or even the problem of knowledge itself, Florenskij's philosophy is oriented towards the creation of "new terminology", crossing "new frontiers" in most fields of human cognisance, not to develop each one separately but to integrate each with the other.

Culture is the milieu in which such activity takes place and cult the resulting factor. Being essentially a conscious effort on the part of humanity to organise space – in workmanship [техника], science and philosophy, and art –, culture is born of an

ontological desire against uniformity and reductionism. The fact of allowing, for instance, Euclidian and non-Euclidian geometry to co-exist is enough proof for Florenskij that different areas of life must be understood and lived with different aims and tools, even though these might be logically contradictory to each other. To his mind, in fact, Russian culture has historically oscillated between two typologies: medieval (consisting of a more organic, 'chaotic', and yet complementary outlook on life) and renaissance (consisting of a more rational, logical, closed, essentially Western outlook on life). As he sees it, the value system – whatever that may be – beheld by humanity determines cult and cult, in turn, determines our concept of the world, therefore, culture.

After the 1917 October revolution, Florenskij was willing to cooperate with the State, especially in scientific endeavours, without compromising, however, his firm beliefs. He worked side by side with Government officials, never, however, seen without his priestly white cassock. In 1933 he was falsely accused of monarchist propaganda which he accepted for his own family's safety. After numerous experiments, discoveries, and lectures in several prisons camps, Florenskij was shot on December 8th, 1937, 30km outside of Leningrad.

This short article was submitted by Glen Attard o.carm (Carmelite Institute Malta, Mdina) following his talk at Philosophy Sharing's monthly public meeting held on 8 January 2014.