

ST. PAVEL FLORENSKY: AN APPRECIATION*

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Perhaps I should begin by saying how and why I came to have an interest in this remarkable and highly complex man who has been called "the Russian Leonardo da Vinci". Although for some years I had been aware of his name through my Orthodox theological studies — first encountering him through George Florovsky's criticisms of certain aspects of his religious philosophy — I came into contact directly with his writings when I read his biography of his one-time spiritual father, the Elder Isidore, which appeared in English translation for the first time in 1987 with the title "Salt of the Earth". It was from the Editors' introduction to this work that I discovered that Florensky was not only an Orthodox priest — one of the New Martyrs of Russia who had died in the Soviet *gulag* and were canonized in 1981 — but also a noted mathematician, philosopher, theologian, electrical engineer, physicist, astronomer, inventor, poet, art historian, and linguist. In short, a man of an incredibly wide range of abilities, dedicated to the belief that all things somehow 'hang together' and that the acquisition of such true knowledge as is attainable in this world demands that it be pursued through a multiplicity of parallel interrelated channels of investigation. Though I cannot myself lay claim to anything like Florensky's range of interests, and certainly do not imagine that I shall ever be canonized as a saint, I do have in common with him that I too am an Orthodox priest, with interests that have included mathematics, philosophy, theology, astronomy, electrical engineering, and art history — in all of which I have had a modicum of education and some experience of teaching.

Pavel Alexandrovich Florensky was born at Yevlakh, Transcaucasia, on 9th January 1882. His Father was of Russian descent and worked as an engineer, whilst his Mother was Armenian, though she made a point of rejecting everything identified with her Armenian upbringing. Although the family observed the conventional religious festivals, his parents were not at all religious, observing these festivals merely as ethnic cultural events — as indeed seems true of so many people today! He was brought up to see scientific enquiry as

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Editor's note: Interested readers can obtain information on the personalities, philosophical movements, and ideas from Russian philosophy mentioned in this paper in most books on Russian intellectual and cultural history, and from histories of Russian philosophy such as N.O. Lossky's *History of Russian philosophy* (New York, International Universities Press, 1951; London, Allen & Unwin, 1952), or the Russian text of Lossky, *История русской философии* (Moscow, Vysshchaya Shkola, 1991), or George L. Kline's two-volume English translation of V.V. Zenkovsky's *A history of Russian philosophy* (New York/London, Columbia University Press, 1953). A detailed discussion of the Russian religious renaissance mentioned here can be found in Nicholas Zernov's *Russian religious renaissance of the twentieth century* (New York, Harper & Row and London/Darton, Longman & Todd, 1963). Leonid Sabanef's brief study of "Pavel Florensky — Priest, scientist, mystic" (*Russian Review* 20, no. 4 (1961), 312–325) has recently come to my attention.