

P.A. FLORENSKIJ

by N.N.

Translated and edited by\*

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On 8 December 1937 the prominent Russian theologian and philosopher Father Pavel Florenskij was executed in a Stalinist camp. Among Russian thinkers at the start of the century, marked by a steep cultural and religious ascent, P.A. Florenskij displayed an exceptional breadth in his knowledge and interests — from theology and philosophy to engineering and physics, from logic and mathematics to museology and art.

Pavel Aleksandrovich Florenskij was born on 21 January 1882 near the village of Evlakh in Elizavetpol province.<sup>1</sup> After graduating from the second Tiflis<sup>2</sup> gymnasium, Florenskij entered the Physico-mathematical Faculty of Moscow University, finishing with a first-stage diploma<sup>3</sup> in 1904. Among Florenskij's tutors and teachers were the outstanding Russian mathematicians of the turn of the century: N.V. Bugaev<sup>4</sup>, B.K. Mlodzievskij<sup>5</sup>, L.K. Lakhtin<sup>6</sup>. In 1904, in issue 9 of the journal *Novyj Put'* Florenskij published

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\*All footnotes are the translator's.

<sup>1</sup> Evlakh is in Azerbaijan.

<sup>2</sup> The modern Tbilisi or Tbilisi, capital of Azerbaijan.

<sup>3</sup> Bachelor's degree.

<sup>4</sup> Nikolai Vasil'evich Bugaev (1837 – 1903) was one of the founders of the school of function theory at Moscow University.

<sup>5</sup> The Pole Bolesław Młodziejewski (called in Russian Boleslav Kornelievich Młodzievskij; 1858 – 1923) taught the first courses in set theory and theory of functions at Moscow University and established the Russian terminology in these subjects. His 1907 dissertation on *Transfinite Numbers* was the second treatment in Russian on Cantorian set theory.

<sup>6</sup> Leonid Kuz'mich Lakhtin (1858 – 1927) worked in the theory of algebraic equations and mathematical statistics.

the article "On the Symbols of the Infinite" — the first study in Russia of the ideas of G. Cantor.

In the years 1904 – 1908 Florenskij studied at the Moscow Theological Academy, where, on completing his studies he remained as a docent in the History of Philosophy Department. In 1911 the rector of the Academy Bishop Feodor (Pozdeevskij) raised Florenskij to the dignity of ordained priest. The time spent teaching in the Theological Academy was marked by the publication of many works by Father Pavel, including the religious tract "The Pillar and the Affirmation of Truth. The Experience of Orthodox Struggle in the Twelve Epistles."

After the revolution of 1917 and the rout of the Theological Academy, Florenskij served as academic secretary on the Commission for preservation of masterpieces of art and antiquities at the Trinity-St. Sergius Monastery<sup>7</sup>; on the initiative of V.A. Favorskij<sup>8</sup> he taught in VKhYTEMAS,<sup>9</sup> and did clerical work in an engineering office in the Glav-elektro<sup>10</sup> system. In this period Father Pavel carried out his work on the physics of dielectrics, carried out museum work, artistic studies, and conceived and partially completed writing the monumental philosophical work "At the Watersheds of Thought."

In Bolshevik Russia, people like Florenskij could not be outspoken in expressing their ideas and views (persecution of the Church was the official political soviet policy from the very moment the Bolsheviks seized power). In 1928 Florenskij was exiled to Nizhni Novgorod,<sup>11</sup> where he was sent thanks to the intervention of E.P. Peshkova.<sup>12</sup> Five years later,

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<sup>7</sup> The Troitse-Sergeev Monastery in Sergeev Posad (called Zagorsk in the Soviet period) was one of the most venerable and revered in Russia, and had been the heart of the Russian monastic tradition, and had established a special moral suasion and influence on the Grand Princes of Moscow. Founded in the fourteenth century by the kenotic monk St. Sergius of Radonezh and dedicated to the Holy Trinity, it contained one of the best hagiographical libraries in Russia outside that of the Monastery of the Caves in Kiev.

<sup>8</sup> V.A. Favorskij (1886 – 1964) was a graphic artist and painter; he did illustrations for some famous literary works (Pushkin's for example). The translator is grateful to Alexei Barabashev for providing information on the identity of Favorskij.

<sup>9</sup> VKhYTEMAS: Vysshie Khudozhestvenno-Technicheskie Masterskie (High Artistic-Technical Laboratories), where several famous painters and architects worked after Revolution. This Institute was founded in 1920. The translator is grateful to Alexei Barabashev for providing assistance in identifying this reference.

<sup>10</sup> Glavelektro: Electrification Administration, the organization responsible for bringing electricity to communities and the countryside and for creating and administering the hydro-electric industry.

<sup>11</sup> Better known in the West as Gorki (which it was renamed by the Soviets for the writer Maksim Gorki (1868 – 1936; *nom de plume* of Aleksei Maksimovich Peshkov), and where physicist Andrei Sakharov had also spent internal exile under Soviet rule.

<sup>12</sup> Ekaterina Pavlovna Peshkova (*née* Volzhina; 1876 – 1965) was first wife (from 1896 to 1904) of Gorki. From February 1918 to the middle of 1937 she was the head of the Moscow Committee of

on 26 February 1933, following a vicious attack in print, Florenskij was arrested and sentenced to ten years imprisonment. In the summer of 1934 the philosopher was transferred from the Far East to the Solovetsk prison-camp on special assignment.<sup>13</sup> On 25 November 1937 at the height of the Stalinist terror a special triumverate of the directorate of the Leningrad District of the NKVD<sup>14</sup> sentenced Florenskij to be shot.

In 1981 the Council of Archbishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad celebrated a memorial mass for the new Russian Holy Martyrs of the godless slaughter.<sup>15</sup> Along with the family of the last Russian autocrat, Father Pavel Florenskij was also proposed for glorification as a martyr (this is testified to by the blessed icon which the Council of Archbishops dedicated to the new Russian Holy Martyrs, where Father Pavel is portrayed amongst the priests done away with by the bolsheviks). Of course the glorification of Father Pavel amongst the new Russian martyrs did not always mean Church recognition of the sum of Father Florenskij's theological ideas, which were not without reason subject to criticism by the orthodox thinking of Orthodox theologians.

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Support for Exiles and Prisoners (the so-called "Political Red Cross"). The translator is grateful to Alexei Barabashev for providing providing this information.

<sup>13</sup> Originally a monastery, founded in 1430 by the monks Saavaty and German on the Solovetskij Islands offshore in the White Sea, it was used from earliest times as a place for the banishment of rebellious monks, heterodox zealots and heretics, and occasionally the *persona non grata* nobleman sent into exile by the tsars; in the Soviet period it was a "special purpose" forced labor camp (see, e.g. Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*).

<sup>14</sup>NKVD: Narodnye Kommissariat po Vnutrennykh Del (Peoples' Commissariat for Internal Affairs), one of the former names of the KGB.

<sup>15</sup> To be precise, on 1 November (18 October, Old Style) 1981. A black-and-white reproduction of the Icon of the New Holy Russian Martyrs and Confessors of the Faith (св. Новомученики и Исповѣдники Россійскіе) referred to in the next sentence will be found at the end of the "Translator's Introduction."