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# PAVEL ALEKSADROVIČ FLORENSKIJ'S METHOD OF DISCERNING SPIRITUAL TRUTH



## ABSTRACT

This article explores Pavel Florenskij's dialectical method as the preferred way to discern spiritual truth. It presents the Russian polymath's method within his socio-political and ecclesiastical contexts and two of his works, namely his *magnum opus* entitled *The pillar and ground of truth*, and his lecture *Reason and dialectics*, both of which are significant for interpreting Florenskij's thought. The article also provides an intertextual reading of Florenskij's *Pillar* to argue that its context is 1 Timothy 3:14-16. It then analyses the similarities between the context of 1 Timothy and that of *The Pillar*. As they fall within a period during which particular churches faced certain challenges, both texts call for discernment of the true identity of the church.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is fitting to start this reflection on Pavel Aleksandrovič Florenskij's method in discerning spiritual truth with a quote from Tertullian:

When the apostle would restrain us, he expressly names philosophy as that which he would have us be on our guard against. Writing to the Colossians, he says, 'See that no one beguile you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, and contrary to the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.' He had been at Athens, and had in his interviews (with its philosophers) become acquainted with

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that human wisdom which pretends to know the truth, while it only corrupts it, and is itself divided into its own manifold heresies, by the variety of its mutually repugnant sects. What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from the porch of Solomon, who had himself taught that the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart (Wisdom 1:1). Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the Gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our palmary faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides (Tertullian 1844:7).

The inspiration for the choice of this citation, which, from my viewpoint, mirrors the Russian polymath's *persona*, is Florenskij's personality and writings. A detailed investigation of Florenskij's *Weltanschauung*, expressed in his erudite writings, is sufficient to understand the reason for such an approximation. Besides, this is not new to the study of Florenskij. In an appreciation of his friend Pavel, Sergej Bulgakov (1971:128) stated that in him "met and were united in a particular way culture and the church, Athens and Jerusalem". In a recent elaboration on Bulgakov's indirect reference to Tertullian's rhetorical question on the relationship between Athens and Rome, the Academy and the church, Natalino Valentini (2004:10) states that Florenskij's integrative and interdisciplinary method

concretizes itself in the definitive choice of his faithful belonging to the church, a belonging which, although faced with actual persecution, is nonetheless alien to any hesitation.

To some extent, Florenskij's own metaphysical and physical pre-occupations echo Tertullian's commentary on the Apostle's warning in his letter to the Colossians. Paul the Apostle, Tertullian and Florenskij alert us to "that human wisdom which pretends to know the truth". They claim that philosophy – to be understood, in this instance, as "human wisdom" (Tertullian 1844:7), "logical terms" (Florensky 1997:5, 7, 24), the musings of the "rational mind"<sup>1</sup> and human understanding which is contrary to the wisdom of the Holy Spirit (Florensky 1997:80-105) – corrupts truth while thrusting us into an impasse in our search for truth.

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1 Рассудок (German: Verstand) differs from Разум (German: Vernunft) inasmuch as the former comes from man (understanding) and, in Florenskij, it tends to oppose God's wisdom, while the latter, "Reason", originates in God and enables us to have a unified vision of reality.

It would not be far-fetched to state that the church still has the same preoccupations, especially those who reflect upon the complex relationship of the ecclesiastical experience of a community of believers immersed in the world. On the basis of the belief in the incarnation, this preoccupation presses for renewed and valid answers to the challenges posed by such a complex relationship. The Johannine Jesus himself, in the priestly discourse given during the Last Supper, touches upon this issue while praying for the disciples who are called to be immersed in the world without being of the world.

It should be made clear from the outset that the polymath's plan of action and solution are different, at least in part, from those of his predecessor. While Tertullian rules out the dialectical method, Florenskij promotes it, alongside reason, as the key to discerning spiritual truth (Истина). It is assumed that reason and dialectic are Florenskij's way of critically reflecting on the lived experience of spiritual truth in the church. Discernment is in itself a "critical reflection on lived spirituality" (Waaijman 2001:483). It observes differences, perceives tension, gathers and sorts out knowledge with respect to the way toward God:

It tests the end and the means and creates a critical centre. With a contemplative eye it looks at a person's life journey and envisions its perfection (Waaijman 2001:483).

This study attempts to explain Florenskij's personal experience of the act of discernment. Although, as far as one can tell, Florenskij does not use the terms *discernment* or *discretio* in the conventional sense of the word, he makes, through his own experience, a useful and more focused contribution to the theme of discernment. His reflection on discerning spiritual truth through dialectics is not theoretical inasmuch as it reflects his own way of going through a discerning process.

In the Western tradition, discernment is often conventionally regarded as acts performed by an individual within the context of spiritual direction, conscience, personal experience, choice and feelings and as relating to the human subject that is challenged to examine deeper motivations and to test them (Waaijman 2001:492-500). Taking, as an example, Florenskij's experience from the Russian Orthodox tradition, this search for, and testing of deeper motivations would include reflection on spiritual truths that may be helpful for discernment in the wider context on a critical moment in the life of the church. Testing one's motivations with an eye on the spiritual way could also imply a testing in terms of the wisdom of the past and of spiritual truths. This article purports that Florenskij's insights can be helpful in this instance: How does one, through dialectics, discover those spiritual truths that are also relevant for the spiritual way.

## 2. THE CONTEXT

Разум и диалектика is the title of the oration delivered by Florenskij to defend his thesis in 1914. It marks his proposal for an adequate and unified theory of reality. One cannot, to some extent, understand his method in *The pillar and ground of truth* without reading the oration. Similarly, one will not comprehend what is implied in the oration without knowing the context.

Soon after graduating in mathematics and physics, Florenskij enrolls in the Moscow Theological Academy. During his years at the Academy, he publishes various erudite works in search of his own personal approach to the discovery of truth. In a letter dated 31 January 1906 and addressed to Andrej Belyj,<sup>2</sup> Florenskij laments that he is finding it difficult, nearly impossible, to get his works published:

to a particular journal [my work] is too scientific, to another one, written too much 'in a new style'; to another one, it's too mathematical, etc., another one doesn't like the mystical and theological elements. In short, I am incapable of meeting everybody's expectations and in conscience I cannot change that method, which – as it appears to me – seems to be my authentic journey (the researching of concepts and the synthesis of heterogenic material (Belyj-Florenskij 2004:72-73).

In a nutshell, Florenskij describes his “new style” of putting together and integrating various areas of human knowledge. Florenskij’s new style, especially with regard to his reflections on the identity and mission of the church as “bulwark of truth” (1Tim 3:15) should be read in the light of the historical turning point for the Orthodox Church in Russia in the wake of the 1905 revolution and, at a later stage, in the 1917 Bolshevik revolt. As a detailed analysis of the historical, social, political and religious background is beyond the scope of this article, only brief remarks will be made on the context. The twelve-year period between the revolution and the revolt (1905-1917) was marked by a certain profound awareness, especially among the non-religious *intelligentsia*, that first the Tsarist autocracy had to be overthrown and that, secondly, the Russian Orthodox Church had become “a slave of conscience”. The roots of this new awareness originated in the suppression of the Moscow Patriarchate by Tsar Peter the Great (1672-1725) and its being supplanted by the Holy Synod to keep the Russian Orthodox Church under control and to neuter its opposition to the Westernisation of Russia (Feralto 2012:297). In fact, this *change in conscience* had already started with the reforms imposed by Patriarch

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2 Polymath. His real name is Boris Nikolaevich Bugaev, son of Nikolai Vasilievich Bugaev, founder of the Moscow School of Mathematics.

Nikon of Moscow (1605-1681) and Tsar Aleksej, leaving a divided church in Russia. Subsequent to these reforms, the politics of Peter the Great paved the way for the Russian conscience to move from an ecclesiastically trained world view to the Russian secular technical and scientist utopia visualised as real enlightenment (Stammler 1960:225; Tagliagambe 2006:20). In this context, there developed a paradoxical mixture of spiritual vigour – flourishing among the Russian Christian *intelligentsia* – and the rise of utopic nihilism – culminating in the Bolschevic Revolution: the church was demanding the proclamation of a Council and the re-establishment of the Moscow Patriarchate amidst high expectations and disillusionment in various movements. There were calls for a reformed, restructured and spiritual church by, for instance, the Merežkovskij's<sup>3</sup> who, inspired by “Nietzsche's challenge to rationalism, positivism, and Christianity” (Rosenthal 2007:330), argued that there was no hope for the “historical church” and preferred to practise their religion at home (Pyman 2010:96).

This profound change or shift also had negative, violent and divisive consequences on both the ecclesiastical and the political level, as is well known from the still influential history (Bianchi 2008:15-24; Freeze 1996:308-350; Camilleri 2012:24-43; Attard 2012:33). Within the context of the church, faith and religion, one is faced with the question as to how to discern truth and remain faithful to it amidst changing times. Challenged by this question that arose from a conflict between culture and religion, Florenskij found that discernment increasingly made him “speak from within the church” (Pyman 2010:96), respecting its two dimensions of the spiritual and the historical, rather than from without or in opposition to the church. In so doing, he was distancing himself from the so-called “God-seeking” intelligentsia (богоискатели) who abandoned Orthodoxy (Pyman 2010:96). Florenskij's understanding of the church is that she is at one time

indissolubly united to her Creator and divine Founder and inseparable from her own human condition. Consequently, because of her particular constitution, the church has a double character, and

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3 Followers of the “new religious consciousness” movement led by Dmitrij Merežkovskij (1865-1940) and Nikolai Berdiaev (1874-1948). As with the Symbolist movement, it was influenced by Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900). Florenskij, himself at one time part of the *bogoiskateli* movement, was influenced by Solov'ëv's unitarian world view as expressed in his *Sophiology* and *Godmanhood*, but he did not fall into the excesses of these movements. Florenskij criticises “the people of the ‘new consciousness’” in Letter Five of *The pillar*, while delving into an analysis of the Holy Spirit's role in the life of the church as *The comforter* (Florenskij 1997:91). For a detailed study, see Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal's essay, *A new spirituality: The confluence of Nietzsche and orthodoxy in Russian religious thought* (Steinberg & Coleman 2007:330-357).

her substantial duality – *dualité constitutive* – or dual character is revealed in every movement of the ecclesiastical body (understood in its biblical sense) (Florenskij 2008:112).

This duality reflects, or is an extension of the bi-unity of Jesus Christ, her founder (Florenskij 2008:112). Duality is also typical of the divine-human act of discernment, understood as a spiritual-moral act involving God's truth approaching us and our freely choosing to behold his revelation (Costa 2002:159).

Florenskij's upbringing was marked by the utopic rise of a new scientific conscience, in which religion was taboo and regarded as obscure (Florenskij 2011:181; Pyman 2010:2-3; Attard 2012:33). Faced with a deep spiritual crisis on an existential and relational level, Florenskij moved from science, mathematics and physics to theology. He went as far as to reject the chair offered to him at the Department of Mathematics and Physics at the Moscow University in order to further his studies at the Moscow Theological Academy in Sergiev Posad. Nonetheless, this shift did not mean that he abandoned his scientific endeavours. It was rather an integrative process that combined the lived experience of the church with an immersion in the challenges of the emerging secular society to the imperial church.

This shift also included his response to his family's criticism. Florenskij (1999:45-130) defends his radical decision to study theology in the 1904 dialogue *Эмпирея и эмпирия*. In 1912, he presented in part the thesis entitled *On spiritual truth*. Two years later, he defended it and published it in its entirety after many revisions and second thoughts as *The pillar and ground of truth* (1914). This magisterial work had to be evaluated by the Academic Council and the Holy Synod. His mentors S.S. Glagolev and Bishop Theodor Pozddevskij, fearing the restrictive censorship of the Synod, reluctantly urged Florenskij to make major changes, among which, the elimination of the fundamental chapters – from the perspective of the polymath's vision – on *Gehenna, Wisdom, Friendship and Jealousy* (Valentini 2004:85-87). These chapters were, in Florenskij's opinion, "the philosophical and theological *telos*" of the entire opus (Florenskij 1996:742-743).<sup>4</sup>

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4 It would be interesting to analyse these chapters in order to illuminate the theological (and perhaps political) motivation behind censorship. Such a hermeneutical exercise would take into consideration that Florenskij's *Pillar* calls "for an experiential dogmatics" (Valliere 2007:391), while challenging the church's dogmatism as a response to the cultural and religious crisis of the time. In his *Догматизм и догматика*, Florenskij (1994:561) uses the metaphor of a beautiful but gloomy Gothic cathedral to lament that "the body and the soul

### 3. CAPTURING THE SPIRIT AND RESPONDING TO CHANGE

The *Essay on orthodox theodicy* is considered to be one of the major theological works of the twentieth century. It had an impact on both the Russian culture prior to World War I and the Russian Orthodox church's "frozen period" during the Soviet Regime after the downfall of the Tsarist regime. Florenskij's personality and work are prophetic witnesses in a period marked by deep transitions in culture, faith and spirituality. Florenskij describes this experience vividly:

A fracture in world history was verified in what I experienced. All of a sudden it became clear to me that 'time was being dislodged from its hinges' and that because of this, something very important was coming to an end, not only for me, but also for history. This instilled in me a sense of mortal anxiety and burning pain. It was the unbearable consciousness of perceiving the demolition of that which was constructed with enormous effort, not only mine, but the common effort of the whole of Europe. Nonetheless, in this intense suffering, it was possible to perceive the onset of freedom and resurrection, again, not only mine, but that of all people (Florenskij 1988:138).

Florenskij was aware that the empiricism of a technical and scientific world view, in which he was formed, was yielding to a spiritual world view. In his understanding, the Renaissance was submitting to the Middle Ages, obviously not in a chronological order, but in the search for existential meaning and, thus, for truth (Florenskij 1988:147).

Epochal changes, with their many voices and sounds, with their instability and chaotic noise, are privileged *loci* for discernment. In 1905, Florenskij expressed this when, in an analytical study entitled *Гамлет* and dedicated to his friend Sergej Troickij, he reads the tragedy as the Danish prince "being so torn between two incompatible consciences that a deep-seated fracture splits his personality" (Florenskij 2004:41). This situation of life and death requires wisdom that is able to integrate the two (Florenskij 2004:37-41), so that one may move forward with one, good conscience. Hamlet is finally crushed between two consciences or world views.

In *Gamlet*, Florenskij purports to *experience* (опыт) in a dialectical manner. Quoting Schelling, he states that dialectic

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of the religious worldview have separated themselves from each other". People outside the church cannot find their way in, while insiders are imprisoned in lifeless traditionalism hurling ineffective anathemas to outsiders, who, ironically, may wish to enter.

consiste in una serie di prove del pensiero che si succedono coerentemente, consiste in una serie di *esperienze* del pensiero su se stesso, correttamente concatenate; il pensiero sperimenta su stesso, organizzando singoli momenti del processo dialettico, e attenendosi nel far questo alle proprie leggi, alla propria natura. Tuttavia, man mano che organizza i singoli momenti – o sistemi – la ragione scopre un limite nell’anello della catena che ha creato, la sua incompatibilità con le condizioni necessarie della veridicità, con i criteri di verità; scopre la falsità del singolo anello in quanto tale quando viene preso nella sua esclusività (Florenskij 2004:9-10).<sup>5</sup>

It is through the dialectical movement that the microcosmic individual reason connects with the macrocosmic universal reason (Florenskij 2004:11). In line with the medieval world view, Florenskij (1983; 2007:208) is convinced that

there is an ideal affinity and correspondence between the structure of the individual and the world; there is a reciprocal conditioning of each other, an interpenetration of one into the other, a substantial bond between them.

Dialectic is, therefore, fundamental in order to discern reality. In an incomplete work *У водоразделов мысли. Чёрты конкретной метафизики*, Florenskij develops his understanding of the dialectical process (Florenskij 1990).<sup>6</sup> In this instance, reason and objective reality enter into a reciprocal, eternal and rhythmic dialogue, in which the former is attracted to objectivity through an experience of awe.

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5 In *Razum i dialektika*, Florenskij mentions: “Questo è il contenuto del libro. Passiamo ora la metodo. Ebbene, per colui che lo ha sfogliato credo che non vi sia dubbio che tale metodo sia la *dialettica*, intendendo il termine nella sua accezione più vasta di pensiero immediato, vivo e vitale in contrapposizione al pensiero *scolastico*, e cioè raziocinante, che analizza e classifica. Non è un discorso *sul* processo del pensiero, ma il processo stesso del pensiero nella sua immediatezza, è il pensiero palpitante dimostrabile *ad oculos*. E l’esempio più semplice della dialettica, cioè del pensiero in movimento, è in fondo ogni autentica conversazione. Dialettica sarà anche ciò che a questo mio discorso seguirà, e cioè il dibattito. L’esempio più sommo di dialettica applicata alla fede lo ha offerto l’apostolo Paolo nelle sue *Lettere*: non è *della* vita dello spirito che ci parla l’Apostolo, ma è la vita stessa che si riversa nelle sue parole e scorre come un flusso vivo. Tra la realtà e il discorso *su* di essa non c’è sdoppiamento, è la *realtà stessa* che si presenta al nostro spirito nelle parole dell’Apostolo.” (Valentini 2004:102-103).

6 *On the threshold of thought*. Sections of this incomplete study are available in Italian translations, among which Florenskij (2007:121-229; 2003:75-135; 2003).



In this integrative procedure, dialectic is neither the beginning nor the end; it is essentially the intermediary between thought and the relationship with the other. It is a process, a mystical one, we can say, which enables us to connect with other worlds (Florenskij 2004:12-13). Taking into consideration all of the above, it becomes understandable why, in this particular ecclesiastical context within which he was moving, Florenskij proposes dialectic as the way to discern spiritual truth:

Dialectic has to do with the concrete, the dynamic, the contradictory, and so it finds abundant materials in the history of Christian movements. For all movements are at once concrete and dynamic, while Christian movements have been marked with external and internal conflict, whether one considers Christianity as a whole, or even this or that larger church or communion. The materials of dialectic, then, are primarily the conflicts in Christian movements. But to these must be added the secondary conflicts in historical accounts and theological interpretations of the movements. Besides the materials of dialectic, there is its aim. This is high and distant. As empirical science aims at a complete explanation of all phenomena, so dialectic aims at a comprehensive viewpoint. It seeks some single base or some single set of related bases from which it can proceed to an understanding of the character, the oppositions, and the relations of the many viewpoints exhibited in conflicting Christian movements, their conflicting histories, and their conflicting interpretations (Lonergan 1999:129).

In line with reason (разум), dialectic compares, criticises and purifies categories and perspectives aiming at truth. In *The pillar and ground of truth*, Florenskij reflects critically on “the problem of the certitude of truth” (Florensky 1997:20), by analytically examining the manner in which truth comes to us and by distinguishing between reality or veracity and deception or illusion. The text itself takes the form of seemingly unconnected letters which, when combined, enlighten us with knowledge of the spiritual truth emerging from it.

### 3.1 A text within the text

The title of the work is a quote from 1 Timothy 3:15, where Paul writes about the church (especially verses 14-16):

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these instructions to you so that if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth. Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in

the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

The meaning of *The pillar* and its method can be better understood in this biblical context which inspired it. Paul penned his letter so that the addressee “may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark [ground] of truth”. The context of the letter is about the transition of the Ephesian church from ascetic Judaism to Gnosticism. The church was in danger of passing from exposure to scrupulous legalism to superstition and godlessness.<sup>7</sup> There was also the challenge of false masters or teachers who presented themselves as enlightened (gnostic), true interpreters of the Christian way. Paul directs the overseers to guide the church in truth.

Centuries later, by analogy, Florenskij’s text originated in similar transitional phases in the social, political, theological and ecclesiastical spheres. These phases threatened to alter the church’s understanding of herself, her identity and her mission. Kenworthy comments that, in an age where

secularising rulers of the eighteenth century sought to restrict the church’s activities to the ‘spiritual’ realm, a trend that was dramatically reinforced by Soviet rule (Pereira 2010:163),<sup>8</sup>

such a change neutralised the charismatic energy of the church as a catalyst of transformation in the ecclesiastical and socio-political spheres.<sup>9</sup> In an early text, intimately linked with *The pillar*, Florenskij laments that the “concept” of the church was in “a blurred state of confusion”. Quoting Paul Jalaguier, a Waldesian theologian, he thus calls for “prudence” in rationally analysing this concept in the light of Sacred Scripture as interpreted by the church. This process of knowing on the basis of, to use Cassian’s words,

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7 See, for example, 1Tim 1-3; 1 Tim 4:3; 1 Tim 6:20.

8 See also Kenworthy (2010) and Kenworthy’s study in Steinberg & Wanter (2008:21-54).

9 Contemporary upheavals in the social, religious and political spheres reveal this as a recurrent challenge worth reflecting upon via a sound theology of culture. As a particular example, I would like to refer to the closing statements of Yekaterina Samutsevich, Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova delivered on 8 August 2012 at the Moskow Khamovniki District Court during the Pussy Riot trial, wherein the three feminist political protestors were charged with inciting religious hatred against the Orthodox church on 21 February 2012 in a performance in Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Moscow. For their closing statements, cf. Shayevich (2012). For the socio-political and religious dynamics, cf. Kasparov (2012); Bohm (2012).

“true judgement and knowledge” (*Conférences* 2, 2-7; 9.9; 14, 1-8, 21, 34) is necessary in order to maintain, in Florenskij's words, the integrity or purity (целомудрие) of the “mystery of the church” (Eph 5:32):

With sacred zest, it is necessary, on the one hand, to pay attention and not to limit ourselves only to biblical data. On the other hand, we should be cautious not to cross the boundaries and ultimately to add or detract anything [...]. Beneath every text of the Word of God there resides the hidden light; in every sound, wisdom. The competence of science is, therefore, in this case, to gather the particular texts disseminated in the Sacred Scriptures and to band them together into a systematic structured whole, without altering that which is gathered (Florenskij 2006:101-102).

The vague ecclesiastical concept is the result of the lack of an ecclesiastical experience (Florenskij 1997:8-9). Florenskij purports that discernment through this dialectical method maintains harmony in the church's life within the framework of rational analysis (Florenskij 2006:115; Waaijman 2001:484).

In 1 Timothy 3, Paul describes the church with the biblical phrase “the household of God” which generally refers to Israel and “more often to the Temple in Jerusalem” (Wild 1993:898). Worth noting in this context is that before the Temple's entrance were two free-standing bronze pillars, signifying perhaps the Exodus pillars of smoke and fire through which God's presence accompanied and led Israel in the wilderness. These pillars were given the names *Yakin*, meaning “he will establish”, and *Boaz*, meaning “in strength”. These “fire-pillars of cosmic significance” (McKenzie 1992:874) recalled the Presence amidst God's household established in strength.

The church is *the pillar of truth* inasmuch as it continuously preserves and makes present in history the divine truth revealed in Jesus Christ. As household of God, she is also *the pillar of truth* inasmuch as those who are of truth belong to Christ and, therefore, to the church as his body in time. The apostles themselves are also called the twelve *foundations* of the church (see Rev 21:14) inasmuch as they guarantee tradition, namely apostolic succession, from Christ himself (see 1 Cor 3:11; Eph 2:20; Rev 21:14). Thus, the church rests on Christ as the foundational truth in itself, distinct from the truth acknowledged by the world. She is established in strength upon this foundational truth which supports itself and the church. In 1 Timothy 3, the truth preserved and upheld by the church “is the great mystery of our religion or godliness”, namely Christ who “was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory” (cf. also Jn 1:14; Ph 2:7). The entire mystery of Christ himself, including the incarnation, is “the

mystery of godliness” who was hidden “with God” and was made *manifest* (see Jn 1:1, 14; Rom 16:25-26; Col 1:26-27; 2 Tm 1:10; Tit 2:11; 3:41) to the church who, in turn, professes and confesses it (in the faith of believers) as upholder of *the truth*.<sup>10</sup>

The structure of Florenskij’s book is not systematic. As indicated earlier, it is composed of twelve letters written to a brother or friend who was for Florenskij the sacrament of Christ the Friend.<sup>11</sup> The genre itself not only reveals the eruditeness of the author who draws from liturgical, patristic and philosophical (classical and modern) sources in his quest for gaining knowledge of truth, but is also a persuasive model of Florenskij’s method in discerning spiritual truth. The fundamental methodology and thrust of the work reveal the following approaches (Gustafson 1997:ix-xxiii):

- Epistemological: Florenskij uses symbolic logic and arithmology with detailed precision.
- Moral: Florenskij analyses the phenomenon of the human capacity for relationships, for example Friendship and Jealousy.
- Ontological: Florenskij analyses being (existence, reality) and the metaphysical relationship between different categories of being. Such an approach is visible in his letter on Trinity and Wisdom.

Florenskij uses these approaches to investigate how, from a Christian (Orthodox) perspective, one can arrive at spiritual truth and live according to it. Florenskij’s perspective is unitarian. He proposes a Christian world view (*Weltanschauung*) which, in line with the Trinitarian model, through faith dialectically brings together all ideas, objects, experiences, contradictions and persons into mutual relationship and interpenetration. According to Florenskij, disunity reveals the sinful state of a humanity that is alienated from truth, living in an illusory (not real) state (false self), which is quintessentially the experience of Gehenna (Hell). Disunity leads to ἐποχή (suspension) and to nihilism. The former takes the form of, first, Cartesian methodological doubt (scepticism) in which, rationally, one doubts the truth of one’s beliefs and of, secondly, philosophical scepticism which denies all possibility of knowledge, leading to a nihilistic vicious circle of philosophical despair over the loss of God, the loss of objective and absolute values, and over the postmodern condition of alienation and dehumanisation. In this instance, reason degenerates into unhinged ratiocination (Florenskij 2004:100).

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10 This paragraph is partly indebted to Jamieson, Fausset & Brown (2000) and to discussions with Rev. Dr. Paul Sciberras.

11 Recent scholarly works have shown that the friend in question is Sergej Troickij.

Instead of approaching reality with a scrutinising mind, Florenskij proposes to behold the truth in contemplation (вглядывается) (Florenskij 1914:95) which approaches us directly through phenomena, namely through appearances or forms which constitute our experience. In other words, spiritual truth – God – approaches us (anthropodicy – ὁδός κάτω – way downwards – kenosis) while we move towards it (theodicy – ὁδός ἄνω – way upwards – ascesis) (Florenskij 1914:96). This contemplative stance together with the horizontal paradigm of descent-ascent echoes the Johannine tradition, so influential in the development of the Christian ascetical-mystical tradition. Complementary to the way upwards and the way downwards is the other Johannine paradigm of moving from the centre to the periphery, as rendered in the Johannine account of Jesus' journey to Galilee (Beutler 2012). This paradigm is also found in Florenskij's experience of a horizontal (person to person) and vertical (God to humanity) movement towards beholding truth.

In fact, Florenskij understands truth in its fundamental connection with lived experience (опыт). *Istina*, moreover, contains in itself the ordinary and shared drama of life. In his reflection on *istina* (genuine fundamental truth which differs from Правда – *pravda*, namely just/justice, correct, true, right), Florenskij brings together phenomena and noumena (things in themselves, which constitute reality and are independent of our own experience of them). While, according to Kant, we remain ignorant of the noumenal realm and impose the structure of our concepts onto the objects of our knowledge, Florenskij holds that one can reach truth through contemplation. Thus, for Florenskij, the rational search for truth will inevitably lead to the stability of faith in the Trinity experienced as the fullness of Being and Knowledge. For Florenskij, reason, longing for and being drawn towards certainty and stability (Florenskij 1914:100) cannot, on their own accord, behold knowledge of ultimate truth. The journey towards this knowledge is an ascetical one of detachment from all phenomena in order to contemplate the noumena behind them. Ultimately, truth is the Trinity itself wherein the Divine Persons distinctively coexist in the same essence. By participating in divine life, all things coexist in unity through Sophia (Wisdom) which is God's readiness to allow the entire creation into the Trinitarian life. The journey towards divinisation takes place in and through divine love which then overflows into loving relationships of *philia* (friendship) and *agape* (brotherhood), the basic conditions for ecclesiality (соборность).

Florenskij was convinced that one arrives at truth only in and by experiencing the church. It is in experiencing ecclesiality that one arrives at truth inasmuch as it is religion – understood as the binding force between those who profess the same faith – which “saves us from ourselves,

saving our interior world from the latent chaos present therein” (Florenskij 1914:93). Following Solov’ëv, Florenskij purports that “the church is in fact at the basis of society” (Florenskij 2006:113). She

is not only the aggregation of people (the faithful), but also that which binds them together, namely, that essential form of unity given to them from on high and through which they can participate in the divine life (Florenskij 2006:113).<sup>12</sup>

It is worth noting how Florenskij defines salvation. For him, salvation is merely “the equilibrium in the spiritual life”, namely the equilibrium between the vertical and the horizontal, the human and the divine principles and their reasonable bi-unity. Equilibrium is only possible through direct religious experience (Florenskij 2006:112).

The vertical-horizontal movement finds its noblest expression and stability in the person of Jesus Christ, God and man, and in the community he founded in response to Peter’s solemn profession of faith in Matthew 16:16-18 (Florenskij 2006:111). The very notions or images of pillar and ground or bulwark transmit this sense of stability in the face of the restless passions, of sceptic instability and of the flux of time. By befriending and holding on to this “unshakable” spiritual truth, “solid as a cliff”, one receives the gift of “sovereign freedom”, salvation from the wild, hellish fire of the Gehenna, “purity of heart” or integrity, and peaceful stillness in God’s Reign (Florenskij 1997:187-189; Waaijman 2001:510; Un Chartreux 2003:40-41).

### 3.2 Navigating between Scylla and Charybdis

Facing the danger of being enslaved by or caught up between two ideological movements made up, on the one hand, of the Holy Synod controlling the Russian Orthodox Church leading her to a deadlock and, on the other, of the reactionary “God-seeking” *intelligentsia* advocating a spiritual ecclesiality (Florenskij 1997:187; Valentini 2004:86-89), Florenskij reverts to God’s household to find, through wise discernment, spiritual truth within “the spiritual treasures of the church” and so, to gradually come “to see their value” (Valentini 2004:5). His thought emerges from the experience of a life enlightened by an intellect moved by the Holy Spirit which, for him, is the essence of ecclesiality (Florenskij 1997:8; Bulkagov 1980:17-41; Rupnik 2001:28-29). In so doing, he indicates the way forward for the church to remain faithful to herself and to the truth upon which she

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12 This is a direct quote from Solov’ëv (Sobranie sočinenjii III/ii, 2:351).

is built and which she has the mission to preserve. Herein lies perhaps the validity of Florenskij's method of discernment, even for the present, when

spiritual discernment tends to stem forth from the solicitude, open to all of the faithful, to embark in the task of renewal in all spheres of the church's life, paying particular attention to the challenges pertaining to the church's unity, the spiritual-pastoral leadership, apostolic choices, the synchronization between charism and establishment, the individual and the community, freedom and authority, and finally between the different charisma and ministries existent and operative in it (Costa 2002:155).

In describing his method, Florenskij explains that he never for a moment attempted to please his opponents:

I will not permit anyone to put limits to my conscience and to my thought, but at the same time I do not intend to violate the conscience or understanding of others, no matter how much these appear to me to be ridiculous (Florenskij 1914:97; Valentini 2004:86).

In making necessary changes to the text *On spiritual truth*, he was not motivated by fear of the Holy Synod, but by the fact that, in submitting a dissertation for a defence, one expects such changes – even though they did not affect the essence of his method (Valentini 2004:86-87).

The judgement which does most justice to Florenskij's method of discernment and acquiring knowledge of spiritual truth (as presented mainly in *The pillar and ground of truth*) is that of Bishop Theodor, who remarks:

upon reading this work, the feeling is that one does not only become knowledgeable in particular areas, but that one grows spiritually with it; to really comprehend this work, it is necessary to grow first (Pozdeevskij 1914:140-181).

Indeed, Florenskij's way of experiencing this method was that of a spiritual exercise. Examiners and judges could fail him and deprive him of his work, but they could not take from the depths of his heart that which he came to possess during the process itself: "It is good for me to adhere to God: in him I have put my hope." (Florenskij 1914:98; Valentini 2004:111).<sup>13</sup>

What is this if not spiritual wisdom and discernment?

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13 See also Psalm 73 (72): 28.

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