

Beauty, Goodness, and Truth in Pavel Florensky's *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*

Addressing his reader, the author of the book, priest Pavel Florensky, warned that he took this collection of reflections as something intermediate: “it is an exclusively preparatory one, for catechumens.”¹ These letters are intended to provide “some sustenance for them until they are able to receive nourishment directly from their Mother’s hand.”² His utmost goal was making people regard “living religious experience as the sole legitimate way to gain knowledge of the dogmas.”³ The book was first published 103 years ago, and with the passage of time shows that the most diverse readers have gained spiritual support from it. Much has been revealed to them, not only the unknown, but also what is unimaginable by the depth of penetration into the mystery of knowledge, the mystery of beauty, the mystery of love, the mystery of faith, the mystery of life, and the mystery of the Church.

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¹ “A catechumen is one receiving rudimentary instruction in the doctrines of Christianity, preliminary to admission among the faithful of the church.” See *Pavel Florensky, The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), 6.

² Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* (PGT), 7.

³ PGT, 5.

As catechumenal reading, the book is no less, and probably even more relevant today than a hundred years ago. By today, the secular era has given way to the post-secular, with unexpected trends towards a revival of religious ardour, and sometimes is ossified into fundamentalism and fraught with the old disease of clericalism. And yet the mass consciousness remains secular. Moreover, there is a new and growing wave of aggressive atheism in today's Russia. It is, precisely, our time that needs so much this highly heartfelt and poetic collection of Florensky's letters. I think these letters, these reflections, can well be recommended as exceptionally wise and a promising means of catechization.

In Russia, after the abolition of the totalitarian atheistic ideology a quarter of a century ago, the most important mission of the Church became the catechumenate. This was understood by many as "churching" of people who knew about their Christian roots and were willing to find the lost spiritual ground, but did not remember anything about their historical religious culture. The process of churching primarily took the form of teaching and of acquaintance with Church life, rituals, customs, and with external forms of churchliness as in clothes, gestures or meals. The degree of churching is often judged just by the carefulness of observation of these external rules of conduct. So the basic question of churching should be: what is churchliness? What should be the tone of catechization?

By his book, Florensky helps us understand and feel what it is like to bring the catechumens to experience the churchliness.

*Ecclesiality*⁴ —that is the name of the refuge where the heart's anxiety finds peace, where the pretensions of the rational mind are tamed, where great tranquility descends into our reason.⁵ Let it be the case that neither I nor anyone

⁴ Translator's comments: "It would be presumptuous of me to define ecclesiality [*tserkovnost'* in Russian] when Florensky himself says that he cannot. Using Florensky's own language, ecclesiality is the essence of the church (existing before the institution of the church), 'the Divine-human element out of which the sacraments, the dogmas, the canons, and even to some degree the temporary, everyday routine of the Church are crystallized in the course of Church history.' Ecclesiality = spiritual life. Ecclesiality, as Florensky sees it, appears to be a peculiarly Orthodox concept, and he claims that only the Orthodox, among the branches of the Christian church, have preserved it in its purity." See *ibid.*, 7.

⁵ Translator's comments: "I use the word reason to render *razum* (equivalent to the German *Vernunft*) and rationality/rational mind to render *rassudok* (equivalent to *Verstand*). The corresponding adjectives *razumnyi* and *rassudochnyi* are rendered as reasonable (used in the sense of pertaining to reason) and rational. 'Reason' is the mind or intelligence in man that comes from God and is able to see things integrally; the 'rational' mind comes from man and tends to oppose what comes from God. The rational mind must be "killed off" by an act of asceticism, self-sacrifice, and then it is replaced by 'reason,' the mind that is in its proper subservient place, i.e., subservient to spirit in man." See *ibid.*

else can define what ecclesiality is! ... Indeed, do not its very indefinability, its ungraspableness by logical terms, its ineffability, prove that ecclesiality is life, a special, new life, which is given to man, but which, like all life, is inaccessible to the rational mind?⁶

Florensky reminds us of the Apostle's words:

The Church is the body of Christ, 'the fullness of him (τὸ πλήρωμα) that filleth all in all' (Eph 1:23), ... what the Apostle told us: namely that ... How then can this 'fullness' of Divine life be packed into a narrow coffin of logical definition?⁷

But this impossibility is not a barrier. Churchliness is

The Divine-human element out of which the sacraments, the dogmas, the canons, and even, to some degree, the temporary everyday routine of the Church, have been crystallized in the course of Church history—to that extent one can preeminently apply to the Church in this fullness of the Apostle's prophecy: 'there must also be divergences among you (δεῖ – καὶ αἰρέσεις ἐν ὑμῖν εἶναι)' (1 Cor 11:19), – i.e., divergences in the interpretation of ecclesiality. Nevertheless, anyone who does not flee the Church receives into himself by his very life the unitary element of ecclesiality and knows that ecclesiality is and what it is.⁸

Florensky's letters are a sort of reading that allows one to feel the taste, the aroma, and the charm of spiritual life. Without this experience of sensing the phenomenon of churchliness, any speculations on the spiritual life are meaningless. Florensky says: "Where there is no spiritual life, something external must exist as an assurance of ecclesiality."⁹ With reference to Catholicism and Protestantism, he proceeds:

A hierarchy—that is the criterion of ecclesiality for Roman Catholics. On the other hand, a specific confessional formula, the creed, or a system of formulas, the text of the Scripture, is the criterion of ecclesiality for Protestants... If in Catholicism one can perceive the fanaticism of canonicity, then in Protestantism one can perceive the equally great fanaticism of scientism.¹⁰

These quotations betray the influence of the false confessional stereotypes that were prevailing in the Russian theological and religious-philosophical thought of the XIX century. I can only note that ten years after the publication of the *Pillar*, Florensky wrote about the need for Christian unity in a completely

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 7-8.

different state of mind. So what he said about the Orthodox spirituality and ecclesiality in 1914 can, and should now, be attributed to the idea of Christian ecclesiality as a whole, which is certainly diverse and abundant in traditions.

The indefinability of Orthodox (I read it as Christian, V[ladimir] F[ederov]) ecclesiality, I repeat, is the best proof of its vitality... There is no *concept* of ecclesiality, but ecclesiality itself is, and for every living member of the Church, the life of the Church is the most definite and tangible thing that he knows. But the life of the Church is assimilated and known only through life—not in the abstract, not in a rational way. If one must nevertheless apply concepts to the life of the Church, the most appropriate concepts would be not juridical and archaeological ones but biological and aesthetic ones. What is ecclesiality? It is a new life, life in the Spirit. What is the criterion of the rightness of this life? Beauty. Yes, there is a special beauty of the spirit, and, ungraspable by logical formulas, it is at the same time the only true path to the definition of what is Orthodox [I mean, what corresponds to Christianity, V.F.] and what is not Orthodox.¹¹

Since Florensky speaks of the Eastern Christian tradition, he cannot fail to mention the *startsy*:

The connoisseurs of this beauty are the spiritual elders, the *startsy*,¹² the masters of the ‘art of arts,’ as the holy fathers call asceticism. The *startsy* were adept at assessing the quality of spiritual life. The Orthodox taste, the Orthodox temper,

¹¹ Ibid., 8.

¹² Translator’s comments: “*A starets* (derived from *staryi*, old; *startsy* is the plural) has been likened to the *directeur de conscience* of Roman Catholicism. According to Ighumen [Abbot] Feodosius (Popov), *starchestvo* (the relationship between a *starets* and those he directs) ‘consists in a truthful spiritual relationship of spiritual children to their spiritual father.’ (See Feodosius’ memoirs in *Sila Bozhiya i nemosbch’ cheloveka* [God’s Power and Man’s Impotence], ed. Sergei Nilus, 2nd reprint edition [Sergiev Posad, 1992], 171.) Feodosius further points out that, in the *Philokalia* [see Florensky’s Note 135], Clement and Ignatius have named five distinguishing features of this relationship: (1) complete trust in the *starets*-, (2) perfect candor before him in word and deed; (3) complete eradication of one’s own will and complete obedience to the will of the *starets*-, (4) abstention from argument and disputation regarding questions of faith; and (5) complete and truthful confession of one’s sins and profoundest secrets. Rooted in evangelical, apostolic, and patristic teaching, *starchestvo* is an exercise whose purpose is to empty oneself of one’s own will and intellect, indeed of oneself. It is through the monk’s own will that Satan attacks him, and by entering into the relationship of *starchestvo* the monk closes the doors of his soul to Satan. He closes the doors to Satan and opens the doors to God’s radiance, and, at the extreme limit of saintliness, he is deified’ [see note *e* on p. 94]. Essential to *starchestvo* is the relationship with another person. God is attained and Satan is defeated through another person. Many spiritual writers have pointed out the dangers of the solitary ascetic path (ibid., 171 ff).

“Following Theophanus the Recluse [See note *a* on p. 12], Feodosius indicates that the *starets* does not absolve or punish. His role is rather to understand and define the spiritual state of the

is felt but it is not subject to arithmetical calculation. Orthodoxy is shown, not proved. That is why there is only one way to understand Orthodoxy: through direct Orthodox experience.¹³

Here, too, we can rightfully substitute the epithet Orthodox for Christian, because we know the devotees both in the Roman Catholic tradition and in several Protestant traditions, who shaped the respective confessional ways of spiritual life.

Florensky helps us get aware that introducing the catechumens to churchliness, that is to true spiritual life, is only possible, and necessary, by warming up their longing for a search of Truth, Good, and Beauty. The book *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* was the development of his thesis “On Spiritual Truth.” He felt the need to explain still more thoroughly the statement of the Apostle Paul that it is the Church that is the Pillar and Ground of the Truth. Hunger for the Truth leads to the Church, where the triune of the values of the Truth, Beauty and Good becomes obvious.

In Letter Four, Florensky concludes: “‘Truth, Good, and Beauty.’ This metaphysical triad is not three different principles, but one principle. It is one and the same spiritual life, but seen from different points of view.”¹⁴ One of the most original and acute Russian religious writers of the early XX Century noted “burning enthusiasm for the truth” as an inherent feature of Florensky.

Here I cannot help but recall that, thirty years ago, when I was in Germany in the crypt of the cathedral of Speyer, I saw on the wall a nun’s profile and words that struck me with their simplicity and at the same time, their depth. These words were: “Whoever seeks the truth is seeking God, whether consciously or unconsciously.”¹⁵ These words were said by a Carmelite nun, St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein) who ranks among the eminent personalities of the European philosophical and cultural elite. An uncompromising search for truth led her from atheism to the heights of holiness. She perished in martyrdom in

one he directs, to explain to him how he has come to sin, and to indicate how he can avoid this sin in the future, and how he can extinguish the passion from which the sin arose (ibid.).

“The practice of *starchestvo* has a long tradition in the Christian East. It flourished in the ancient Egyptian and Palestinian monastic communities in the 4th to 6th centuries. It was then transplanted to Mount Athos [see note *d* on p. 185] in Greece, and finally transported to Russia. In Russia, *starchestvo* is chiefly associated with Optina Pustyn’ [see note *d* on pp. 92-93].” See PGT, 8-9.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 56.

¹⁵ From a letter to a Benedictine nun. See Pope John Paul II, “Homily at Canonization Eucharist,” in *Holiness Befits Your House*, ed. John Sullivan (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2000), 9.

Auschwitz in 1942. In 1987, she was beautified as a martyr; and, in 1998, Pope John Paul II canonized her and ranked among the saint patrons of Europe. Edith was born into an observant Jewish family, and her way, from Judaism, through the teenage atheism, through a fervent search of the philosophical truth while Husserl's assistant in Freiburg, led her to Christ; and in 1933, she chose the life of a nun of the strict Order of Discalced Carmelites.

For me, these are not only two comparable ways, from faithlessness to faith of a Russian-Armenian young man in my country and a Jewish girl in Germany, but also a model of spiritual salvation for the secular postmodern consciousness today. Pavel Florensky and St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross were contemporaries; Teresa was nine years younger, and she took her martyrdom five years after the shooting of Fr. Pavel.

When a student at the Moscow University, Florensky wrote to his parents: "Now the immediate task, not mine of course, but the task of time, is to create a religious science and a scientific Religion." He set the goal of his life "to synthesize ecclesiastical and secular culture ... to perceive all the positive teaching of the Church and the scientific and philosophical worldview, together with art."¹⁶

The understanding of spiritual life as a synthesis and symphony of faith and reason, religion and science, requires a clear picture of what is meant by Truth and the definition of the criteria of Truth.

Twenty years ago Pope John Paul II, in his homily for the canonization of Edith Stein, said:

In our time, truth is often mistaken for the opinion of the majority. In addition, there is a widespread belief that one should use the truth even against love or vice versa. But truth and love need each other. St. Teresa Benedicta is a witness to this.¹⁷

In this regard, I would like to recall the epigraph of the Book, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*: ἡ γνῶσις ἀγάπη γίνεται - knowledge becomes love.¹⁸ A search for Truth, the process of cognition, is generated by love and generates love. Letter Four, "The Light of the Truth," reveals this subject figuratively and in detail. Florensky emphasizes that it is not "a juridical-moral but a metaphysical sense" that he means; he quotes from the Apostle John:

¹⁶ <http://esxatos.com/florenskiy-filosofiya-rossii-pervoy-poloviny-xx-veka>. Accessed July 5, 2018.

¹⁷ Homily of John Paul II for the canonization of Edith Stein. https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_11101998_stein.html. Accessed July 5, 2018.

¹⁸ *St. Gregory of Nyssa De Anima et Resurrectione*, in PG, XLVI, 96C. See *PGT*, 1.

‘He that saith he is in the light [the truth], and hateth his brother, is in darkness [in ignorance] even until now. He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is no occasion of stumbling [i.e., no darkness of ignorance] in him. But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes’ (1 John 2:9-11). Light is the Truth, and this Truth unfailingly manifests itself. The mode of the transmission of this Truth to another person is love, whereas the mode of the transmission to another of dark, stubborn ignorance, which does not desire to recognize itself as dark ignorance, is hate. ‘He that doeth good is of God: but he that doeth evil hath not seen God’ (3 John 1:11)...If there is no love, there is no truth. If there is truth, there is inevitably love... Love follows from the knowledge of God with the same necessity as light radiates from a lamp or nocturnal fragrance emanates from the open calyx of a flower: ‘knowledge becomes love.’ Therefore, the mutual love of Christ’s disciples is the sign of their learning, their knowledge, their walking in the truth. Love is the characteristic sign by which a disciple of Christ is recognized: ‘By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another’ (John 13:35).

Florensky emphasizes that

One cannot make a greater error than to identify the spiritual love of one who knows the Truth with altruistic emotions and the striving for the ‘good of mankind,’ a striving that, at best, is grounded in natural sympathy or in abstract ideas... Even moral activity (philanthropy and so on) is, taken in itself, an absolute zero.¹⁹

This, as Florensky maintains, is clearly stated in 1 Corinthians 13: 1-3.²⁰ Florensky’s philological analysis of the exact meaning of love in Greek thought and in the Old and New Testaments was an attempt to introduce philosophical rigor into the discussion. He distinguished between the Greek concepts of *eros*, *agape*, *philia*, and *storge*, arguing that *agape* and *philia* constitute the truly Christian understanding of love, and downgraded *eros*.

Today’s Russian post-communist society very often discusses the need for ideology for the new Russia; there is a demand for a good national idea. Voices are constantly heard that proclaim the priority of spiritual values over material ones. But this is perceived by many as demagoguery which devaluates the very concept of ‘spirituality.’ In this atmosphere of the spiritual quest for society, the topic discussed today is very relevant.

The topic of “Truth, Good, and Beauty” became quite congenial to the atmosphere of postmodernism. “This metaphysical triad is not three different

¹⁹ *PGT*, 65.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

principles, but one principle. It is one and the same spiritual life, but seen from different points of view.”²¹

Nowadays postmodernists claim that knowledge is constructed and not discovered and should not have universal pretensions. Postmodernists give themselves freedom to create their own world view, and are not constrained by objectivity and rationality. Postmodernists want to replace philosophy, which is a love of wisdom, by philodoxy, which is the love of opinion.

According to postmodernists, truth is dead. The Platonic tradition with its questions about the nature of Truth, Beauty and the Good is not worth continuing because these big questions have lost their relevance. For post-modernists, great questions about the nature of reality and our place in the universe are pointless. There is no truth; there are only provisional statements that are neither valid nor invalid. Distinctions between good and evil, beautiful and ugly, and true and false are not discernible any more.

Postmodernists insist that there are no ideals behind appearances; there is only becoming, and no being; *profanum* and no *sacrum*, and everything is ordinary. People are motivated by base instincts, human behaviour is just a power game, and nothing is serious any more. Postmodernists distrust Reason. For Platonists, belief in Reason (Logos) is the core itself of philosophy. Socrates linked Reason with the Good. God was, for him, good and rational; He created an orderly world and gave us mental powers to discover this order.

According to post-modernists, ordinary people know very well what is good for them. Those insisting on canons, standards and values are branded as elitists whose motives are highly suspicious. What they supposedly want is to create an intellectual apartheid. The democratisation of truth and moral norms, when only the majority has the power to legitimise them, is the source of today’s relativism.

Thanks to Florensky the question of truth, is once again at the centre of our attention. Nowadays in Russia and not only in Russia it is very topical. It also seems to me important to develop Florensky’s reflections on the metaphysical triad “Truth, Good, and Beauty” in the context of his revised world outlook, because later, he would assert that “the basic law of the world is the second principle of thermodynamics - the law of entropy, taken broadly, as the law of Chaos in all areas of the universe. The world is opposed by the Logos - the beginning of ectropy” (i.e., the change towards ordering, greater organization, complexity, i.e., in the direction opposite to entropy leading to chaos, degradation).

²¹ Ibid., 56.

Every culture represents a purposeful and tightly connected system of means for the realization and disclosure of some value accepted as fundamental and unconditional, i.e., serves some subject of faith. The first refractions of this belief in the inalienable functions of a person are determined by the angles of view on the areas associated with these functions, i.e., to all being, as it is correlated with man. These angles are categories, but not abstract, but concrete; manifestation of their action is a cult. Culture, as evidenced by etymology, is a derivative of the cult; ordering the whole world by categories of worship. Faith defines the cult, and the cult is a world outlook, from which culture follows. But this is a topic for special research.²²

And one more unexpected thought has arisen by discussing not only the triad “Truth, Good, and Beauty,” but generally speaking, the whole corpus of Florensky’s works. The latter is invaluable as a pool of illustrations to the contemporary original theories and scientific attempts to penetrate the mystery of psychology of personality. At the beginning of the XX Century, psychologists designed some techniques to assess IQ, the human cognitive intelligence quotient. Over time, psychologists have come to a unanimous agreement on the definition of intelligence as “an individual’s ability to understand the relations existing between the elements of a certain situation, and adapt to them so as to be able to achieve his goals.”²³ By 1995 studies in emotional intelligence by Daniel Goleman, have become well-known; along with the IQ, he introduced the concept of EQ, that is emotional intelligence quotient.

To continue, in 1997, Danah Zohar coined the term “spiritual intelligence” in her book *Rewiring the Corporate Brain*.²⁴ That same year, in 1997, Ken O’Donnell, an Australian author and consultant living in Brazil, also used the term “spiritual intelligence” in his book *Endoquality - the emotional and spiritual dimensions of the human being in organizations*.²⁵

Howard Gardner, the originator of the theory of multiple intelligences, chose not to include spiritual intelligence amongst his “intelligences” due to the challenge of codifying quantifiable scientific criteria.²⁶ Instead, he suggested

²² P. A. Florenskij, “Avtoreferat,” *Sochineniya v 4-kh tomakh*, t.1 (Moskva: Mysl’, 1994), 39.

²³ Norbert Sillamy, *Dictionar de Psihologie Larousse* (Bucuresti: Univer Enciclopedic, 1998).

²⁴ Dinah Zohar, *Rewiring the Corporate Brain: Using the New Science to Rethink How We Structure and Lead Organizations* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koeler, 1997), 14, 120.

²⁵ Ken O’Donnell, *Endoquality - as dimensões emocionais e espirituais do ser humano nas organizações* (Salvatore, Brazil: Casa da Qualidade, 1997).

²⁶ Howard Gardner, “A Case Against Spiritual Intelligence,” *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 10, no. 1 (January 2000): 27-34.

an “existential intelligence” as workable.²⁷ However, contemporary researchers continue to use the practicability of Spiritual Intelligence (often abbreviated as ‘SQ’) and to create tools for measuring and developing it.

Cindy Wigglesworth defines spiritual intelligence as “the ability to act with wisdom and compassion, while maintaining inner and outer peace, regardless of the circumstances.”²⁸ Frances Vaughan, Doctor of psychology, former president of the American Association of Transpersonal Psychology writes:

As a psychotherapist, I am convinced that the spiritual intelligence opens the heart, illuminates the mind and inspires the soul. It is one of several types of intelligence and it can be developed relatively independently. Spiritual intelligence calls for multiple ways of knowing and for the integration of the inner life of mind and spirit with the outer life of work in the world. It can be cultivated through questing, inquiry, and practice. Spiritual experiences may also contribute to its development, depending on the context and means of integration. Spiritual maturity is expressed through wisdom and compassionate action in the world.²⁹

According to Stephen Covey, “Spiritual intelligence is the central and most fundamental of all the intelligences, because it becomes the source of guidance for the others.”³⁰

I can only add that an essential understanding of the triunity of intelligence, ethics, and aesthetics can be found in the theological and philosophical interpretation by Florensky of the triad of Truth, Good, and Beauty.

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²⁷ Howard Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 53.

²⁸ Cindy Wigglesworth, *SQ21: The 21 Skills of Spiritual Intelligence* (New York: SelectBooks, 2012), 7.

²⁹ Frances Vaughan, “What is Spiritual Intelligence?” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 42, no. 2 (April 2002): 16-33. <http://francesvaughan.com/attachments/Spiritualintell.pdf> . Accessed July 5, 2018.

³⁰ Stephen R. Covey, *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 53.