

Florensky and the Personalisation of the Word

Florensky and the Questions of His Age

What came first, the word or the deed? What are the origins of religion? What is its relationship to mass psychology? Is religion a form of magical thinking? These quintessential nineteenth-century questions¹ waned around the middle of the twentieth but have returned with force today. They were initially raised in the light of the then new theories of socio-cultural and biological evolution; they faded because the initial speculative answers, based on little ethnographic data, were found to be naive once religions around the world were studied using fieldwork methods; but today, the richer ethnographic record together with advances in the neurological and information sciences, enable the questions to be approached with greater sophistication.²

For a social anthropologist to read Pavel Florensky with this background can be a disconcerting experience. One reason, no doubt, has to do with this particular social anthropologist's very limited knowledge of Florensky's intellectual milieu. But the main reason is another. Florensky is clearly concerned with those same nineteenth-century questions, as well as others relating, say, to telepathy, kinetic energy and spiritualism. They are the same questions tackled, in a different milieu

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¹ See George W. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

² See Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Tanya M. Luhmann, *When God Talks Back* (New York: Vintage, 2012).

and in a completely different style by G.K. Chesterton³ in his polemics against public intellectuals that he considered either excessively materialist or excessively spiritualist. Unlike Chesterton, Florensky shows some familiarity with certain ethnographic theories, some of which he explicitly mentions, while the implied presence of others is impossible to miss. Throughout, what is arresting is the way that Florensky manages to be both a figure of his age and an uncanny precursor of several later intellectual developments. In the process he flies against the characteristic assumptions of both contemporaries and successors.

Florensky does not seem to have had much access to ethnographic studies (the modern type of fieldwork was only instituted in the 1920s), as can be seen by the anecdotal and literary examples he cites in his early work on superstition and miracles. However, the questions he tackles in that work show a familiarity with the work of cultural evolutionists like Edward Tylor and James Frazer,⁴ who took an intellectualist approach to religion, seeing it essentially as primitive science, and therefore full of misunderstanding of how the world works. Religion was considered to be an improvement on “magic,” associated with more “primitive” societies, and deemed to consist of an individualist attempts at the manipulation of cosmic forces for private ends, unlike religion which was public and propitiary. Florensky must have such work in mind when he discusses miracles in terms of science, religion and magic.⁵ He broadly accepts the terms and their distinctions (which are queried today) but departs from the analysis in a strikingly modern fashion.

Whereas Frazer was famous (and enormously influential) for deducing the logic of rituals from his reading of literary sources, missionary reports and early ethnographic expeditions – believing that the meaning could simply be read off the described behaviour – Florensky argues that behaviour cannot yield meaning in this way. It is only context, and knowledge of motive, that can distinguish “superstition” from perceptive apprehension of the world. He does not discount the claims of science, but says the legitimately secular aims of science are valid in their realm but do not exclude the claims of religion. In his work on the “magical value of the word,” Florensky would go further and associate “the word” (by which, here, he understands “language”) with a self-organising cultural world

³ See Gilbert Keith, Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Louisville, Kentucky: GLH Publishing, 2016).

⁴ James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁵ Pavel Florenskij, *Sulla superstizione e il miracolo*, ed. Natalino Valentini, trans. Claudia Zonghetti (SE: Milano, 2014).

(“a small closed world.”)⁶ This implicit critique of Frazer echoes (and in places anticipates) the insistence by Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert that social meaning was contextual and that any single belief needed to be examined as part of an entire cosmology. Nor, I believe, is it reading too much into what Florensky says about the scope of science to see in it the schematic lineament of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s⁷ later caustic critique of Frazer: in their different ways, both Wittgenstein and Florensky attribute a creative power to language that Frazer overlooks.

Much of Florensky’s knowledge of the social sciences comes out implicitly in what questions he tackles. However, the three times he does mention prominent names, in the lecture notes published under the title of *At the Crossroads of Science and Mysticism*⁸ all have a point of interest.

Florensky passes an approving remark about Marxist critiques of bourgeois ideology as exploitative⁹ – but the “ideology” in question is “scientific world-understanding.” In this instance Florensky appreciates the role that class relations might play in a field of endeavour that, in principle, should transcend class. However, he mentions it as a contrast with “ecclesial world-understanding.” It is a pity that he never factored in that religion, in practice, might also experience the structural contradiction of universalistic religion whose churches, however, sometimes identified with exclusivist nation-states (and nationalist ideology).

There is only a cursory reference¹⁰ to the work of Hubert and Mauss, who as joint authors proposed seminal theories on religious sacrifice and on magic.¹¹ But it is interesting that Florensky describes their work as illuminating “mass psychology” and not, as is usual, “culture.” One reason might be that Florensky’s conceptual understanding of “culture” – at least to go by the compressed lecture notes – is not articulated in a particularly interesting way. But the main reason is that Florensky was thinking of religion as not reducible to culture, understood as a “small closed world,” since it also enabled a collective rationality as well as a “transcendent psychology”¹² of the miraculous and mysticism. Here he

⁶ Pavel Florenskij, *Il valore magico della parola*, trans and ed. Graziano Lingua (Milano: Medusa, 2003), 53. My translation from the Italian.

⁷ See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough* (London: Humanities Press, 1987).

⁸ Pavel Florensky, *At the Crossroads of Science and Mysticism*, trans and ed. Boris Jakim (Brooklyn, New York: Semantron Press, 2014).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹¹ See H. Hubert and M. Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic* (London: Routledge, 2001).

¹² Florensky, *At the Crossroads of Science and Mysticism*, 70.

anticipates the work of E.E. Evans-Pritchard¹³ who criticised his predecessors and contemporaries for reducing religion to either psychology or sociology (or both) without paying attention to religion's cognitive element, in particular the way it enables the philosophical exploration of life's mysteries.

Florensky's discussion of Auguste Comte¹⁴ is longer and concerns a critical feature of the thought of both men. Florensky refers to Comte's ambition to discover laws of human affairs that were as universal and necessary as the laws discovered by the natural sciences. Interestingly, Florensky accepts that such laws may be discovered for economics and sociology (a minority view nowadays) but not for history. For history is the study of particular, individual, singular cases – that is, of what made them singular and unrepeatable – and therefore there are no laws that can be generalised.

We can pass over this distinction between history and sociology (for it is possible to have a sociology of individuals and individuality) to focus on a point of greater interest. For Florensky, the paradigmatic case of the irreducibly singular is the person. There is no such thing as saintliness qua general concept, he says; there are only saints, people who achieved sainthood precisely by not giving up their uniqueness but living up to it, being “eternally new.”¹⁵

These three cursory references to other thinkers are interesting in themselves but in combination show true originality. The singular personality is said to go with the ecclesial world-understanding, a dramatic upending of the usual assumption that to subscribe to a religion is to agree to some notional conformity. At the same time, perceptiveness (as well as its potential frustration by ideology) is linked to collective rationality.

It is out of these elements that Florensky presents a philosophical anthropology of the person, and which I will attempt to sketch and evaluate. For reasons of space, I will focus mainly on his essay, “The magical value of the word.”¹⁶

Florensky and Language

One way to get to the heart of Florensky's argument is to contrast his essay title with that of a classic modern essay by the anthropologist S.J. Tambiah, “The

¹³ E. E., Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

¹⁴ Florensky, *At the Crossroads of Science and Mysticism*, 96.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 97, 98.

¹⁶ Florenskij, *Il valore magico della parola*.

magical power of words.”¹⁷ The titles seem almost identical but each key word contains an essential difference.

First, Tambiah writes of “words,” in the plural, because what he has in mind is a special category of words – those used in various rituals, under special conditions. Florensky, however, writes of “word” in the singular, since what he has in mind is language – the ability to speak, to enunciate meaning. The reason he never uses the term “language” is that he wishes to focus on the concrete, on the singular instantiation of language by unique persons. He does not simply refer to the sense of words but their very voicing in material sound.

Second, Tambiah uses the word “magical” in the standard anthropological sense to refer to an area of activity removed from everyday causality and having to do with a notional sphere of the sacred. The sacred vs profane distinction is salient here. Florensky departs from this meaning (although he is obviously familiar with it since he had drawn on it himself in his essay on superstition and miracles).

Here, he is using “magical” to mean, roughly, a marvelous transmutation. He intends no gush or hyperbole when he writes that the word is the most manifest vital act all persons perform¹⁸ for it transmutes matter and energy (the material features of voice production) into spirit, and spirit into matter and energy. It transforms collective cultural patrimony into a unique individual’s personality, action and thought, as well as a unique person’s cultural productions into something collective. Language is also deed, for it brings about what it utters, not only in the sense of performing speech acts but also because it constitutes self and relationships. Any single word is constituted by the whole of language, and thus represents a complex cultural universe, while each word is itself condensed with layers of meaning.

Finally, Tambiah refers to magical “power” as he is interested in the use of words notionally to control and constrain events and other people. Florensky speaks of “value,” by which he means a different kind of power, creative, generative and enabling, rather than the zero-sum power games of strategic control.

Its most creative feature is that it is involved in the continual historical and personal process of birth. For Florensky, the most quintessential word is the name. It is the name that calls us out of ourselves, that makes us live up to it. It is in this sense, therefore, both a summary description of us as well as an imperative

¹⁷ S.J. Tambiah, “The Magical Power of Words,” in *Culture, Thought, and Social Action* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1985).

¹⁸ Florenskij, *Il valore magico della parola*, 69-70.

drawing us out. It is our being as well as our becoming. The idea of creative action is salient:

History is a collection of names. ... The relation of names is a ‘begat’-relation, a birth-relation. This formula is the quintessence of history. Birth-relations are, first of all, concrete, independent, individual relations: physical, spiritual, scientific, etc. Birth also signifies artistic succession ... “Abraham begat Isaac” – that is the classic formula of history; everything else is only its unfolding.¹⁹

Florensky is obviously not reducing history either to kinship or to a “great man” theory of history. He is clearly talking about a person-centred conception of history that involves all persons. It is through the power of language that they make the world their own. They appropriate a cultural patrimony but at the same time, to be intelligible even to themselves, must open themselves up to the organic demands of language, and in speaking to others are recreating and transforming a living language.

Let us pause to see what idea of religion is being proposed here. Religiosity is not what many nineteenth-century thinkers and today’s “new atheists” say it is: a mental attitude based on awe or fear (though in certain instances it may be true). It is in the first place physical, as Florensky continually underlines. His discussion of how posture or chemistry could affect our spiritual state would find a ready popular-magazine audience today.

Nor is religion based on an intellectual mistake, if only because it cannot be reduced to intellectual activity or assent. The word is performative; the self is outpoured creatively towards others.

Finally, there is no distinction drawn here between the sacred and the profane. The magical value of the word sacralises everything. When Florensky writes²⁰ that religion inheres in all culture, he does not mean that it is because humanity has a tendency to feel “religious.” He means that there is no culture without the magical creative value of language. Given our physical, organic constitution as linguistic animals we cannot opt out of this creative sacralising engagement with the world.

To my philosophically untrained ear, it sounds like an argument from design, and given Florensky’s interest (in other essays not discussed here) in the name of God, it may be linked to an argument for the existence of God. But in any case, this is an argument for the permanent sacrality of the world based on a continual cosmic process of radical newness.

¹⁹ Florensky, *At the Crossroads of Science and Mysticism*, 7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

It contradicts Max Weber's characterisation of the modern world as "disenchanted" – driven by the granular outlook of science and dominance of instrumental reason to inhabit a cold "iron cage." Nor is Florensky's emphasis on birth to be conflated with the religious experience of being "born again." The latter is based on the experience of an existential break with one's past and radical choice. Florensky is talking about a continual process that is based on an ethos of exploration not choice.

Critique of Florensky's Anthropology

Given Florensky's polymathic interests, it is almost too easy to find links between his thought and thinkers that came later. I do not think it trivial to point out the overlap between his project and that of, for example, the Roman Catholic thinker, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, or the secular scientist, Ilya Prigogine. But I will restrict myself to pointing out where Florensky seems both to prefigure later seminal developments in social theory as well as to fall short of them.

In building his model of human communication, Florensky devotes considerable time in offering a theory of semiotics. He may possibly be the first semiotic theologian, preceding the Dominican friar Herbert McCabe²¹ who combined Wittgenstein with Aquinas to produce a semiotic understanding of the sacraments, by several decades. Florensky's emphasis on personhood and human agency enables him to avoid the arguable shortcomings of semiological structuralism, namely, that human agency is not given sufficient importance. However, his achievement is limited by his lack of distinction between speech and language (*parole* and *langue*); while, in discussing signs, he does not differentiate between signifier, signified and referent. Anyone wishing to develop Florensky's thought further down the semiotic route will probably need to rearticulate his arguments in a more promising framework, whether of French structuralism, pragmatist semiotics, or the analytical philosophy of language.

A more significant criticism lies in his decision to ignore the operations of worldly power. In his discussion of miracles,²² Florensky allows for a discussion of evil and its masks. But his discussion of the magical value of the word does not. The potential of humanity to deploy destructive ideologies and myths, or for creativity to exist in tension with control, or for different "world-understandings" to clash is missing. An anthropologist today would find it difficult to discuss the perception of divine power without exploring what experience of secular power

²¹ Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (Oxford: Mowbray, 2000).

²² Florenskij, *Sulla superstizione e il miracolo*.

informs it.²³ The entangled relationship between religion and the nation-state is also not simple.

Perhaps Florensky ignored worldly power not because he considered it unimportant but rather because, in terms of his model, he considered it an aberration – like all evil, something missing from what is good. So it could be that what he presented was a picture of a transfigured world – a state of original blessing, rather than of the world after the Fall. In this case, the criticism is of course unwarranted but it also means that any adoption of Florensky’s thought for pastoral or social purposes will not be simple.

Florensky Among the Personalists

From a Roman Catholic viewpoint, there are at least three trajectories worth exploring with the aim of combining Florensky’s philosophical anthropology with contemporary socio-political thought.

One is the thought of the French personalist philosopher, Emmanuel Mounier,²⁴ who was a younger contemporary of Florensky and an important influence on the Catholic centre-left in Europe, especially after 1945. Like Florensky, Mounier emphasised that personalism was not a system of thought but rather a method of raising and pursuing questions. His particular critiques of the social structures of his day (say, the bourgeois family) are obviously outdated but his understanding of culture (as the way in which globalised relations are literally personalised in individuals) can be fruitfully read in the light of Florensky, and vice-versa.

A second is Saint John Paul II, whose admiration for Florensky is well known, given the mention of the Russian thinker in the encyclical *Ratio et Fides* as an exemplar of how to combine faith and reason. But I have in mind the late Pope’s book, *Memory and Identity*²⁵ (2005), which he described as a quasi “theology of nations” (while obviously recognising that nations are not collectively saved or damned). In that work, he offers an interesting personalist understanding of patriotism, which presents “native land” as a deep bond between the material and the spiritual, between culture and territory, and where to be a patriot is to struggle to keep one’s native land at a cultural highpoint.

²³ M. Gilson, *Recognizing Islam* (London: Croom Helm, 1982).

²⁴ E. Mounier, *Personalism* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

²⁵ John Paul II, *Memory and Identity: Personal Reflections* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005).

There are important differences of emphasis. If for Florensky history is the story of continuing artistic birth, then for John Paul it is the story of artistic struggle. Florensky identifies with the Transfiguration, John Paul with the Crucifixion, Poland's twentieth-century fate at the hands of both fascism and communism very much on his mind.²⁷

The resources of these two Catholic writers make it possible to bring a critical edge to Florensky's anthropology: Mounier in thinking about globalisation (even if he died long before its current incarnation), and John Paul in thinking about a Christian patriotism in a world increasingly shaped by extreme populism.

However, Florensky would also enrich our understanding of those two and other social thinkers. In his incisive work on varieties of religion today, Charles Taylor²⁸ relies on a (deliberately) simple three-stage scheme. There is "paleo-Durkheimian" religion – in which religion is coterminous with cultural cosmology and social roles; you cannot lose your religion without dropping out of society. There is "neo-Durkheimian" religion, where religion is identified with the nation-state, and thereby permeated with nationalist sentiment as much as religion might sacralise the state. And there is "post-Durkheimian" religion – what is sometimes called, by its critics, "religion à la carte;" people picking and choosing among doctrines and ritual practices, a privatised religion for an individualist culture. It is a mark of Florensky's originality that he articulates a religious ethos that transcends the polarisation between collective public religion and individualist privatisation. He emphasises religion's role in fulfilling the uniqueness and creativity of each person, of each becoming a saint in his or her own way – an early powerful case that individuality and collective identity go together. Whatever is made of it as theology, it is a compelling social vision of how no one can reach their full personal communicative potential unless everyone else does too.

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