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Clemena Antonova (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 110 pp.

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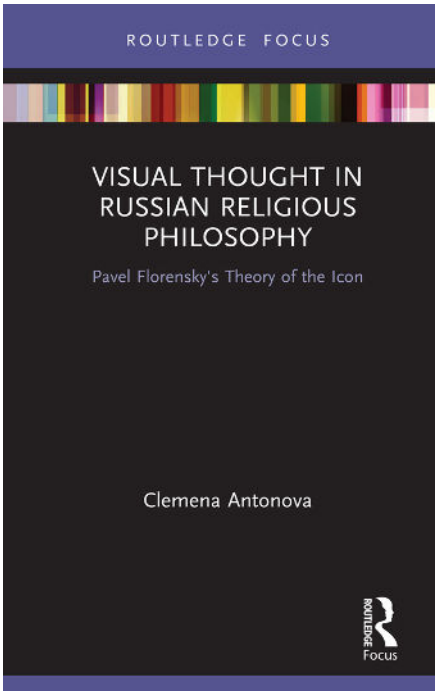

Visual Thought in Russian Religious Philosophy: Pavel Florensky's Theory of the Icon

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Pavel Florensky is undoubtedly one of Russia's most fascinating intellectuals. An accomplished mathematician who wore a priestly cassock to electrical engineering conferences, Florensky was born to irreligious parents in 1882 in the midst of the Russian "Silver Age." Best known by theologians for his *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* (1914), and by art historians for his essay "Reverse Perspective" (1919; published posthumously in 1967), Florensky has attracted much attention (and skepticism) for his ability to fuse an appetite for scientific pursuits to a deeply mystical worldview. It is this aspect of his thought that receives special attention in Clemena Antonova's slim volume *Visual Thought in Russian Religious Philosophy: Pavel Florensky's Theory of the Icon*. Building on earlier studies, including her book *Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon* (2010), Antonova situates Florensky's oeuvre at the crossroads of religious studies, art history, theology, and philosophy. Yet, as she observes, Florensky is not really an "interdisciplinary" polymath, in the sense of a thinker who collides observations from various domains to create a synthetic conceptual whole. Rather, as she notes, Florensky treats individual themes as belonging to a greater transcendental unity. It is this insight that drives the methodology of the book, which divides neatly into four case studies of Florensky's thinking about visuality: man and God (chapter 1); the icon in space (chapter 2); faith and reason (chapter 3); and church ritual (chapter 4). In the course of these chapters, Antonova's choice of themes ranges from the icon's symbolic economy to its agency in *theosis*, from its spatial

ontology to its organic relation to the liturgy. For all this apparent diversity, a single historical context guides the discussion, namely, the philosophy of "all-unity" (*vseedinstvo*) which suffused fin-de-siècle Russian religious thought. As Antonova demonstrates, this theoretical school exerted a strong influence on Florensky. While firmly anchoring him in this relatively ephemeral intellectual phase, throughout her study Antonova touches on issues of broader interest to scholars of the icon. It is these aspects that I shall highlight in what follows.

In chapter 1 Antonova raises a long-debated question in the study of the late medieval icon: How exactly did Hesychasm change the way people saw an image? Placing Florensky within the Russian spiritual movement of "name worshiping," Antonova draws a comparison between the Russian thinker and the fourteenth-century theologian Gregory Palamas. Palamas's followers famously taught the Jesus Prayer where God's name is softly repeated over and over again alongside several invocations. Name worshipers, who flourished on Mount Athos in Florensky's day, believed that God inhabited his name. Hence, to utter God's name was to experience him concretely. Drawing a parallel with this theory of naming, Antonova observes that Florensky considered the image to be "a symbol in the sense that it 'contains' the presence of the depicted being or figure. The symbol *is* the symbolized. Thus, the icon of Christ (immanent) *is* Christ (transcendent)" (22). Said differently, for Florensky, who rejected Saussure's doctrine of arbitrary signs, the icon, in a sense, transcends its material particularity. While Antonova aligns Florensky's semiotics with that of Byzantine iconophiles (many art historians would challenge this point), her evaluation of the icon as an "energetic symbol"—that is, an energy that "contains" the divine essence—is a thoughtful contribution to the study of Palamas's nineteenth- and twentieth-century reception. As Antonova notes, Florensky's crucial insight was to apply Palamas's key theological distinction (that between God's essence and his energy) to the icon. While Palamas himself never took this step, it sheds light on scholarly debates involving medieval image theory, including, for instance, whether the medium of the icon (wood, gesso, paint, etc.) is negligible. Does the image reveal the signified like a windowpane? Discussing Florensky's use of this analogy, Antonova writes: "once we are able to see the light through [a window], then it becomes 'that very light itself' and not just 'like the light'" (29). Exploring how Florensky, to say nothing of the Symbolists (capital "S") that he knew, understood symbols, Antonova shows that he used Byzantine ideas to whet the edge of a new aesthetic project. Crucially, it involved vaunting the icon to programmatically reject naturalism's claim to truth.

It is this thesis that Antonova examines in detail in chapter 2 which deals with space in the icon. Here, Antonova builds upon her conclusions in *Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon*, a book that is suggestively subtitled "Seeing the World with the Eyes of God." In the present volume Antonova re-reads Florensky's famous essay "Reverse Perspective." There, Florensky proposes that "distortions" in how iconographers represent space, including, for example, multiple viewpoints, convey something of God's eternal, omniscient perspective. In other words, when an icon painter shows you both the top, the side, and a bit of the underside of a footstool all at once, he (and it is usually a he) is providing you with a mental representation that approximates, however faintly, what God,

who is not bound by any single place or time, sees when he looks at the same footstool. Extending a claim that she first made in her 2010 book, Antonova argues that Florensky means to say that the icon actively participates in the viewer's *theosis*, which is to say, her sanctification, as she draws closer to a beatific vision beyond natural vision. This is a provocative insight, and it is one that offers a subtle, but telling, revision of her earlier study. There, she pointed out that Florensky in fact argued that "reverse perspective remains closer to the way vision functions" (36)—that is, to the way vision *naturally,* not *spiritually*, functions. To put the point differently, Florensky, who was never one to shy away from a polemic, asserted that Albertian perspective in fact gets the geometry of the natural world wrong. For space is actually structured according to a non-Euclidean order. Claiming that it is this non-Euclidean reality that the iconographer depicts, Florensky flipped common sense on its head, measuring Renaissance naturalism by the yardstick of icons. In essence, he argued that they offer a more scientific worldview than a realist canvas. In Antonova's words, Florensky "explained away … distortions" by "denying them" (56–57). However, in *Visual Thought*, she arrives at a different conclusion, and it is one that has profound implications for how we understand the icon painter. Is the artist's use of reverse perspective an attempt to burrow down to absolute empirical reality? Or is it a way of disclosing the heavenly vision of the saints? Here, Antonova decides it's the latter.

Chapter 3 elaborates on Florensky's interest in non-Euclidean geometry. The argument here involves showing that Florensky's visual thinking provides an alternative to the "Western" binary of a sacred or profane, a religious or secular worldview. With the spread of fashionable "Orientalisms" in late nineteenth-century Europe, intellectuals began looking for new aesthetic paradigms. It was then that the icon stepped forward as a genuine alternative to Renaissance naturalism: "For Florensky, drawing a link between non-Euclidean geometry and iconic space was much more than an intriguing notion, as it ultimately came down to the implied claim that the icon in its embeddedness in a religious worldview could offer a viable counter-model of visuality to the one that had been dominant since the Renaissance and especially the Enlightenment" (57). In this sentence, Antonova points to one of the great ironies of Florensky's aesthetic philosophy. In his hands, a deeply conservative visual tradition becomes a hallmark for freedom. The icon implies liberation from the conceptual strictures underpinning the status quo.

Finally, chapter 4 examines Florensky's essay "Church Ritual as a Synthesis of the Arts" (1918). Of all the chapters, this one perhaps provides the most illuminating vantage point from which to survey contemporary scholarly debates concerning the icon. In these pages, Antonova addresses the question of whether a complete art historical account of the icon ought to consider the contribution of all five senses as well as a phenomenological analysis of church space. Protesting the Bolshevik campaign to "preserve" icons by subjecting them to scientific conservation, Florensky claimed that they can only be understood within their liturgical setting. Only when the viewer has seen the image submerged in candlelight, as a choir sings and the walls grow cold with night, can she understand what the painter has accomplished artistically. Identifying this view with the German idealist pursuit of the "total work of art" (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), Antonova shows that the

Russian thinker offered a prescient reinterpretation of this aesthetic model. In contrast to Wagner, who located the total work of art in the ancient Greek city-state, where tragedy was born, and to the twentieth-century avant-garde, which often located it in the technologically advanced future, Florensky located it the medieval Christian world.

Antonova has written an engaging, clear, and well-organized book. In each chapter, she finishes off with a section entitled "Conclusions and Implications." In these passages, she abstracts out from the minutiae of close readings to address topics of concern within the art historical (and theological) study of icons. This allows each chapter to be read independently. It also has the virtue of making the book's forays into icon theory, which will be unfamiliar to many readers, accessible to a broader audience. For all these reasons, the book will likely be of interest to scholars beyond the narrow sphere of Orthodox studies. Indeed, Florensky adds much to our understanding of visuality. He offers a glimpse into how a highly unconventional and strikingly modern way of looking at icons can be cast as if it were traditional and medieval.

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