

**VISUALITY AMONG CUBISM, ICONOGRAPHY, AND THEOSOPHY:
PAVEL FLORENSKY'S THEORY OF ICONIC SPACE**

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In the 1990s, two important publications attracted attention to the pervasive impact of Occultist teachings in Russian intellectual life. Both Maria Carlson's *"No Religion Higher Than Truth": A History of the Theosophical Movement in Russia, 1875-1922* (1993) and the collection of essays, edited by Bernice Rosenthal, entitled *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* (1997) leave the impression that Western Esotericism, in all its variants such as Theosophy, Anthroposophy, Spiritualism, etc., was far from a peripheral influence, confined to a limited group of eccentrically-minded intellectuals, as has been frequently assumed. What probably comes as a surprise in recent scholarship is the realization that Esotericism was a mainstream factor, which left untouched almost no aspect of the intellectual landscape in Russia. This is especially true of the late 19th and early 20th century.

The present paper considers the little known influence of Theosophical notions of visuality on Pavel Florensky's² (1882-1937) theory of iconic space.³ Under "Theosophy" I will understand the movement created in 1875, which became known as the Theosophical Society, whose most influential representative was Helena Blavatsky.⁴ What is probably the most insightful aspect of Florensky's position on the pictorial space of the medieval image in his essay "Reverse Perspective" (1919)⁵ cannot be understood outside his Theosophically-derived notions of vision in an earlier work, *Smysl idealizma* (The Meaning of Idealism, 1914). The close connection between the two texts has not yet been noticed, but the importance of the icon for Florensky lies exactly in its ability to provide a model of vision at a higher level of existence. To use Florensky's own terminology, the

1 I thank the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) for their generous support, which allowed me to finish the research for this article.

2 In recent years, Pavel Florensky has been receiving increasing scholarly attention in Western scholarship. For the first time, there was a Florensky panel at the 2011 Convention of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies. Florensky's first biography in English appeared in 2010. See Avril Pyman, *Pavel Florensky: A Quiet Genius*, (New York and London: Continuum, 2010). For a brief intellectual biography, see my "Changing Perceptions of Pavel Florensky in Russian and Soviet Scholarship" in Sergei Oushakine and Costica Bradatan, (eds.), *In Marx's Shadow: Knowledge, Power, and Intellectuals in Eastern Europe and Russia* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 73-95.

3 On the influence of occultism on Florensky's work in general, see L. I. Vasilenko, "O magii i okkul'tizme v nasledii Pavla Florenskogo" (On Magic and Occultism in the Heritage of Father Pavel Florensky), *Vestnik Pravoslavnogo Sviato-Tikhonovskogo Gumanitarnogo universiteta* 3 (2004), 81-99. I thank Natalia Golovnina for providing me with a copy of this article.

4 There is a useful outline of the Theosophical doctrine in Maria Carlson, *"No Religion Higher than Truth": A History of the Theosophical Movement in Russia, 1875-1922* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 114-137.

5 For an overview of the different connotations of "reverse perspective", see my "On the Problem of 'Reverse Perspective': Definitions East and West", *Leonardo* 43.5 (2010), 464-470, in which I suggest that Florensky follows not one, as usually assumed, but several definitions of the term "reverse perspective."

“supplementary planes” of the medieval image can be interpreted as a visual analogue of “synthetic vision.”

The case of Florensky is, I believe, revealing of general tendencies that characterize the Russian reception of Theosophy. Florensky, an Orthodox priest and one of the foremost religious philosophers at the time, was not a Theosophist. More than that, he was consistently and openly hostile to the Theosophical Society and particularly the anti-Christian ideas underlying some, though not all, Theosophical writings. At the same time, he borrows directly Theosophical concepts and appears, in general, to be very well versed in Theosophical literature. A more careful reading shows that Florensky bent Theosophical ideas to serve his own ideological and intellectual purposes. Florensky’s Platonizing and Orthodoxizing of Theosophy are typical of a whole trend of Russian thought at the beginning of the 20th century. But what is particular to Florensky is that he utilized notions of visuality, derived from Theosophy, specifically to explain the principle of pictorial space of the medieval icon, i.e. the so-called “reverse perspective.”

Florensky’s writings are also representative of another trend in Russian intellectual and artistic life at that time. As I will show, for Russian thinkers the similarity between modernism and medieval art was natural. Both were seen as providing models of visuality that counteracted the prevalent epistemological model which underlay the modern, rationalistic worldview. Simply put, both the icon and avant-garde art were viewed as alternatives to the dominant Western, Renaissance and post-Renaissance image-making, realizing, in their own ways, the Symbolist dream of escaping “rational art.” In this sense, it was natural for Russian artists and thinkers to be attracted by various esoteric movements, which were invariably interpreted in the same light, i.e. as alternatives to rationalism and positivism.

In the first section of this paper, I consider analogies between image-making in medieval icons and avant-garde paintings at the beginning of the 20th century. I compare the construction of space in Cubist art, especially Analytical Cubism, and that in medieval Byzantine and medieval Russian images. Both Cubist theory and the Russian theory of the icon were informed by Theosophical notions of visuality. The second section will focus on the Theosophical background of Florensky’s view of iconic space.

Between Orthodox Iconography and Avant-Garde Art

The influence of Theosophy on avant-garde art is well known. As Roger Lipsey has stated, for a time Theosophy became “‘the dominant alternative culture’ and ‘the school’ towards which artists and seekers could look for a radically *other* description of man.”⁶ According to Maria Carlson, “while no one would insist on Theosophy as a single cause in the development of modernism [...] the world conception promulgated by occult doctrines [is] one of the factors in the development of modernism.”⁷ Linda Henderson’s

6 Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art* (Boston: Shamhala Publications, 1988), 32-34. In her book, Sylvia Cranston pays some attention to the impact of the modern Theosophical Society and its founder Helena Blavatsky on Yeats, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, the Russian composer Scriabin, etc. See Sylvia Cranston, *HPB: The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky, Founder of the Modern Theosophical Society* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1993).

7 Carlson, “*No Religion Higher than Truth*”, 192.

excellent *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* has drawn attention to the huge popularity of the concept of the fourth dimension, understood in its Theosophical connotation of a higher dimension, among the European avant-garde at the beginning of the 20th century.⁸

In the Russian case, there are two figures, whose affiliations with Theosophy, expressed both in their writings and paintings, have received a great deal of scholarly attention—Vasilii Kandinsky⁹ and Kazimir Malevich.¹⁰ It is not surprising that the Russian avant-garde, as represented by these two artists, was receptive to Theosophical ideas, just as modern artists and thinkers in the West were at the time. What is specific to the Russian case, however, is that Theosophy entered an already on-going discourse on the medieval image. The rediscovery of the Russian icon had started in the middle and late 19th century¹¹ and had acted since as a constant background motif in the evolution of Russian modernism. Thus, what is remarkable is that at the beginning of the 20th century Theosophical ideas were borrowed both in the context of avant-garde art and the theory of the icon by modern artists whose work was already strongly influenced by the iconic tradition and by critics who were responding both to the revival of the medieval image and to avant-garde experiments. It is this complex intellectual and artistic background which was unique to Russia.

The vital link between medieval icons and avant-garde images was almost immediately noticed by Russian intellectuals at the beginning of the 20th century and has recently been popularized in the West by Andrew Spira's wonderful book *The Avant-garde Icon: The Russian Avant-garde and the Icon Painting Tradition*.¹² Nikolai Punin, one of the foremost critics in early 20th century Russia, expressed his belief that "icons, in their magnificence and living beauty, will help contemporary art accomplish achievements which differ from those that have been influencing European art for the last few years."¹³ Alexander Benois, another influential writer, observed that "not only does any 14th century *Nicholas the Miracle Worker* or *Nativity of the Mother of God* help us understand Matisse, Picasso, Le Fauconnier and Goncharova; but through Matisse, Picasso,

8 Linda Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

9 See Sixten Ringbom, "Art in the 'Epoch of the Great Spiritual': Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 29 (1966), 386-418; and by the same author, *The Sounding Cosmos. A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting*, (Abo, Finland: Abo Akademi, 1970). Also, Will Grohmann, *Kandinsky, Life and Work*, (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1958), 41.

10 See Charlotte Douglas, "Beyond Reason: Malevich, Matuishin, and Their Circle" in *The Spiritual in Modern Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*, ed. Maurice Tuchman et al., (Los Angeles, CA.: Abbeville Press, 1986).

11 Dmitrii Rovinski's *Istoriia russkikh shkol ikonopisaniia do kontsa 17 v.* (History of the Russian Schools of Icon Painting up to the End of the 17th Century) (St. Petersburg, 1856) laid the foundations for a systematic study of Russian icon painting.

12 The more recent collection of essays, *The Avant-garde Icon: The Russian Avant-garde and Modernity*, edited by J. A. Gatrall and D. Greenfield, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), looks at the way that ideas that have been important in shaping modernity influenced the theory of the icon and avant-garde art; there is very little visual analysis of the sort that Spira provides. See also, Krieger, V., *Von der Ikone zur Utopie, Kunstkonzepte der russischen Avantgarde* (From the Icon to Utopia, the Concept of Art of the Russian Avant-garde), (Cologne: Bohlau, 1998).

13 Nikolai Punin, "Directions in Contemporary Art and Russian Icon Painting," *Apollo*, (1913); English translation from Andrew Spira, *The Avant-garde Icon: The Russian Avant-garde and the Icon Painting Tradition* (Aldershot England: Lund Humphries, 2008), 81.

Le Fauconnier and Goncharova ... we feel greatly the beauty of these Byzantine pictures much better.”¹⁴ Without doubt, the most significant study was Aleksei Grishchenko’s *O sviazakh russkoi zhivopisi s Vizantie i Zapadom XIII-XX vv.* (On the Connection between Russian Painting and Byzantium and the West, 13th-20th Centuries; 1913), in which the author considers, among other things, the important role that the medieval icon played in the formation of Russian Cubo-Futurism.

Several ideas underlie these writings. First, Russian authors see in icons and modern art a common quality, which can best be described as a drive towards anti-illusionism. Anti-naturalism in modern art is a conscious reaction against what has been the prevalent mode of image-making in the West ever since the Renaissance. Second, in its turn, this common quality means that avant-garde art can make the viewer better aware of the value of the medieval icon. At the same time, because of their iconic tradition which gives them an outside perspective towards Western naturalistic art, Russians can appreciate modern art—both Russian and Western—in more intimate and meaningful ways. In this context, it comes as no surprise that practically all the great representatives of the Russian avant-garde were influenced by icon art, albeit to varying degrees. Some of them, such as Tatlin, had been initially trained as icon painters. Ljubov Popova, on the other hand, studied Cubism in Paris in 1912-1913 and, after going back to Russia, turned to icons. Artists like Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov, who were strongly influenced by Cubism at one point in their careers, increasingly acknowledged their indebtedness to the local tradition of the medieval image.¹⁵ It is Malevich, however, who was probably “influenced by icons more radically than any other avant-garde artist.”¹⁶ This is how Anatolii Lunacharsky, the Bolshevik Commissar of Enlightenment, summarized Malevich’s artistic development: “Malevich began by imitating icons [...] went on to make his own icons even more like toys [...] (under the influence) of the Cubists (Malevich most closely resembled Picabia at this period).”¹⁷

In his book, Spira makes convincing comparative visual analyses of modern paintings by the Russian avant-garde alongside medieval images, which directly or indirectly informed the compositional schemes and/or techniques of the modern works.¹⁸ His conclusion that “the art of the avant-garde often showed striking similarities to icons”¹⁹ is, in this way, well supported by rich visual material. In the present text, I will focus on the theories of spatial construction in icons and Cubist images before moving to their common background in Theosophical notions of visibility. Two of Florensky’s texts are particularly relevant here—the little known *Smysl idealizma* (The Meaning of Idealism;

14 Alexander Benois, “Letters on Art: Icons and Modern Art,” *Rech’*, (1913); English translation from Spira, *The Avant-garde Icon*, 120.

15 See Mikhail Larionov, “Les Icones” (c.1920), in Mikhail Larionov et al., *Une Avant-garde explosive* (Lausanne: Edition L’Age d’homme, 1978).

16 Spira, *The Avant-garde Icon*, 66.

17 Spira, *The Avant-garde Icon*, 69.

18 See especially the chapter: “Iconic Techniques of the Avant-garde,” 47-127.

19 Spira, *The Avant-garde Icon*, 8.

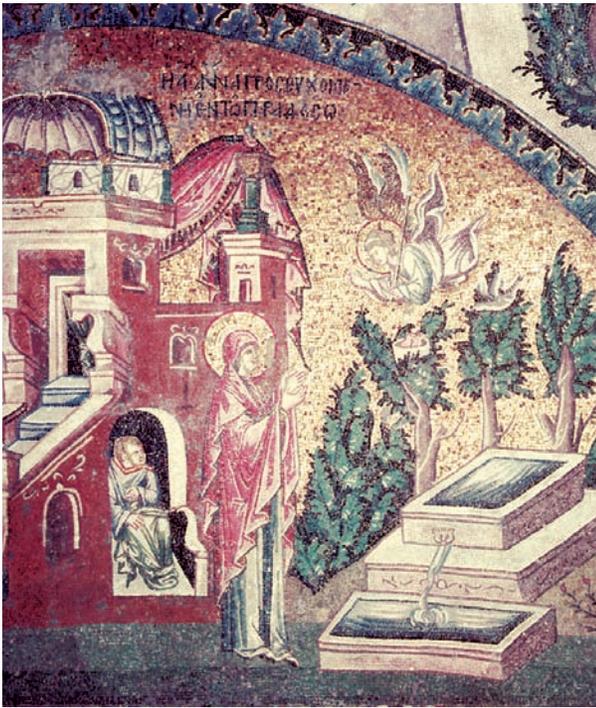


Figure 1. *The Prayer of Anne*, Kahriye Camii, Istanbul, 14th c. mosaic.

1914)²⁰ with a focus on the sections referring to Picasso’s paintings of musical instruments, and the opening paragraphs of the classic essay “Reverse Perspective” (written in 1919),²¹ dealing with the “supplementary planes” of the medieval icon.

In his analysis of the Picasso works that could be seen at the Shchukin Collection in Moscow at the time, Florensky says that “the reality of the artistic image is realized in [...] unifying in one apperception that which is given in different moments and, consequently, under different angles of vision.”²² He cites Grishchenko, who had considered the same Picasso pieces, and quotes: “The division of the object into parts becomes a necessary element in Picasso’s paintings [...] We see the represented object from several points of view.”²³ The terms sound inescapably close to the opening sections of “Reverse Perspective,” according to which one of the fundamental features of the organization of iconic space lies in the representation of “parts and surfaces [of the same object] which cannot be seen simultaneously”²⁴ from a fixed position. This phenomenon is especially noticeable in treatments of architecture in icons.

Lateral sides of buildings in Byzantine and ancient Russian art are frequently represented frontally alongside a building’s facade. For example, Figure 1 shows the lateral sides of the well before which St. Anne is standing alongside the front and the back aspects of the structure. This image is a good illustration of Florensky’s contribution to the theory of iconic space since it can be read in two completely different ways. On the one hand, it can be interpreted as a “reverse perspective” construction in the sense of turning around the laws of standard, linear perspective. According to this view, followed by Florensky in some passages of his essay, the parallel lines of objects are represented as diverging, rather than converging, in the distance. In this case, the lateral sides of the well are clearly diverging (while with linear perspective they would be converging towards a vanishing point). However, the side aspects of the object can also be read as “supplementary planes” without any reference to linear pictorial space, a system of representation invented only in the 15th century.²⁵ Not only are the “supplementary planes” of the object represented—i.e., the ones that should not be there according

20 *The Meaning of Idealism* is available only in Russian at the moment and is, as a result, little known to the Western public. In Russia, on the other hand, it seems to have been largely overshadowed by another work by Florensky, *The Pillar and the Ground of Truth*, which appeared in the same year. This is worthwhile noticing in the context of our discussion, as it is in *The Meaning of Idealism* that Florensky’s debt to Theosophy and interest in Occultism are most obvious.

21 There is an English translation of this essay in Pavel Florensky, *Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art*, ed. Nicoletta Misler (London: Reaktion, 2002). For a critical commentary, see Clemena Antonova and Martin Kemp, ““Reverse Perspective”: Historical Fallacies and an Alternative View,” in *The Visual Mind II*, ed. Michele Emmer, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), 524-566.

22 Pavel Florensky, *Smysl idealizma* (The Meaning of Idealism) in his *Sochineniia v chetirekh tomakh* (Works in Four Volumes), vol. 3 (Moscow: “Mysl”, 1999), 98; my translation.

23 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 102.

24 Pavel Florensky, “Reverse Perspective” in his *Beyond Vision*, 201.

25 For the unsustainability of the contrast between linear and reverse perspective, see my joint paper with Martin Kemp, ““Reverse Perspective”: Historical Fallacies and an Alternative View.”

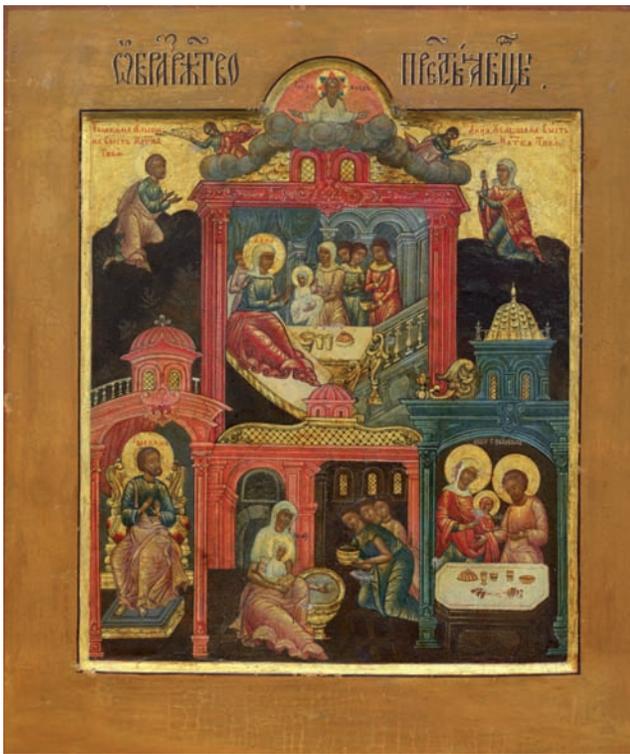


Figure 2. *Nativity of the Mother of God*, Museum of Russian Icons, Accession # 2011.39a.



Figure 3 (detail). Water basin shows “reverse perspective” understood as “supplementary planes.”

to the laws of normal vision at a single moment of time—but they are frequently, as Florensky notices, emphasized by means of color. These “additional”/“supplementary” surfaces are often painted in strikingly bright colors that capture the attention.

Similarly, in a 19th century Russian icon of the *Nativity of the Mother of God* (Figure 2), a very complex pictorial space is filled with objects constructed according to the principle of “supplementary planes.” Below, on the viewer’s left, a saint is resting his feet on a foot-stool. The sides of the foot-stool are represented almost as parallel in the same manner as the table in the lower right corner of the image. Both the table and the water basin in the central section presuppose a side view—which reveals the legs of the table and the stand of the basin—alongside a bird’s eye perspective—which shows the sides of the table as almost parallel to each other and the top of the basin as a circle (See Figure 3). The spatial treatment of all these objects is made possible by the representation of aspects of the object which could not be seen at the same time.

In other words, Florensky took up a well-known characteristic of Cubist image-making and applied it, for the first time, to the theory of iconic space. It should be noticed that Florensky’s notion of Cubism is restricted to early, Analytical Cubism, and so most of the Cubist works of the later phase would fall outside the range of his analysis. That the “multiple planes” of some Cubist images refer to “the simultaneous representation of entirely different viewpoints, the sum total of which constitutes the object”²⁶ was already noticed by Cubist artists and theorists. Thus, Jean Metzinger, the Cubist painter, describes the principle of constructing pictorial space as if “[Cubists] have allowed themselves to move round the object, in order to give [...] a concrete representation of it, made up of several successive aspects.”²⁷ This is, indeed, one way in which we can make sense of Cubist pictorial space—the “multiple planes” of the image are the result of the synthesized representation of various aspects of the object which would be revealed in the process of a successive vision, i.e. as the viewer moves around the object. What is significant with Florensky is his proposition that this principle of constructing pictorial space existed before the advent of modernism—it is a key characteristic of the art of the medieval icon. This notion was restated later on by other Russian authors in their writings on “reverse perspective,” i.e. the principle of iconic space. It is very little known in Western scholarship, while, as was mentioned earlier, it could very well represent, if properly developed, a genuine breakthrough in the field’s thinking on a highly understudied topic.

Borrowing an early 20th century theory, which was worked out to explain contemporary developments in art practice, and applying it to a medieval phenomenon, is potentially problematical. But, at the same time, what made this connection possible is the

26 Arthur Miller, *Einstein, Picasso: Space, Time and the Beauty That Causes Havoc* (New York: BasicBooks, 2001), 106.

27 Jean Metzinger, “Cubisme et tradition,” *Paris Journal*, 16 August 1911, rpt. in *Cubism*, ed. Edward Fry (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966), 66-67.

Theosophical background against which both Cubist art and iconography were placed at the time. One truly needs to be aware of Florensky's specific interpretation of Theosophy, in terms of a *longe dureé* of a Platonic and ancient magical worldview, to understand his views of iconic space.

Between Theosophical Vision and Iconic Space

When Florensky discussed Picasso's paintings of musical instruments in the context of Theosophical notions of visuality, he was referring to a familiar leitmotif. The influence of Theosophy on Cubism was acknowledged at the time and has been established since.²⁸ Arthur Miller has interpreted the combination of profile and frontal aspects of the squatting female figure in Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* in terms of the "astral plane" of Theosophy. It is "as if Picasso imagined himself sitting on the 'astral plane',"²⁹ at which "one sees all sides of an object at once."³⁰ This is how we can understand Braque's concern with the role of painting to exhibit the "full possession of things," a task in which traditional perspective had failed as it showed the object only from one, limited point of view.³¹ André Lhote, a member of Picasso's circle in Paris, talks in a similar vein of modern art's ability to "express the table as a type (*la table type*)."³²

In Theosophy, the astral plane represents a higher dimension of existence. It refers, in Petr Uspensky's words, to "a consciousness that is not bound by the conditions of sensuous receptivity" and that "can rise above the plane upon which we are moving."³³ On this plane of existence, vision operates according to different, higher laws. "Astral vision" "can see the past and the future, lying together and existing simultaneously."³⁴ It corresponds to "a receptivity which is on a level higher than our consciousness, possessing a broader angle of vision."³⁵ This is the background of Florensky's notion of "synthetic vision" in *Smysl idealizma* (The Meaning of Idealism), which he discusses explicitly in the context of Theosophy and more specifically in the writings of the British Theosophist Charles Hinton (1853-1907) cited from Uspensky's book *Tertium Organum* (1911). "Synthetic vision" refers to the ability of the clairvoyant to see an object simultaneously from all sides, rather than from one single point of view as happens in natural vision. Florensky's later essay on "reverse perspective," on the other hand, makes no direct mention of Theosophy, but it makes a clear, though not explicitly acknowledged, connection with the Theosophy-inspired notion of "synthetic vision" from the earlier book.

The principle of the construction of space in the medieval icon, i.e. the "supplementary planes" in the figures discussed above, could be convincingly interpreted as a visual analogue of the concept of "synthetic vision," so long as it refers to the simultaneous representation of aspects of an object which cannot be seen from one point of view at a

28 Tom Gibbons, "Cubism and the Fourth Dimension in the Context of Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Revival of Occult Idealism", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 44 (1981), 130-147.

29 Miller, *Einstein, Picasso*, 106.

30 Miller, *Einstein, Picasso*, 104.

31 Dora Vallier, "Braque, la peinture et nous: Propos de l'artiste recueillis", *Cahiers d'art*, I (1954), 14.

32 Cited in Miller, *Einstein, Picasso*, 114-115.

33 Petr Uspensky, *Tertium organum: The Third Canon of Thought*, tr. N. Bessaraboff and C. Bragdon, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), 42.

34 Uspensky, *Tertium organum*, 42.

35 Uspensky, *Tertium organum*, 48.

moment of time. It is only when we make the connection between Florensky's two texts that we are able to see the icon as a model of "synthetic vision." It is here that a great deal of the importance that Florensky places on the image is to be attributed. In other words, the icon is of value precisely because it provides a visual model of "synthetic" visuality.

In her introduction to the English translation of a collection of Florensky's articles on art, Nicoletta Misler suggests that the first part of the essay on "reverse perspective" is an exploration of "transparent vision,"³⁶ a notion popularized by Theosophical writings. A clairvoyant can exercise a sort of supernatural vision by seeing through opaque objects. To him/her - if not to the rest of us - these objects are transparent. None of Florensky's examples in "Reverse Perspective"—the text under discussion by Misler—actually confirm this view, as no internal surfaces of objects are represented. In the earlier *Meaning of Idealism*, however, Florensky does cite Hinton's famous example of the cube, which had also appeared in Uspensky. In Florensky's words, a synthetic perception of the cube would reveal a sense of the cube "as a whole, both inside and out." It would be analogous, Florensky says, to our perception when viewing all sides of the cube successively, i.e. when the cube is turned around along its six sides.³⁷ Whether called "four-dimensional vision" (Charles Hinton)³⁸ or "astral vision" (Charles Leadbeater),³⁹ the problem for Theosophists always comes down to the possibility of developing a perception that discloses the transcendent and the infinite in the material and finite. The vision of the clairvoyant is "transparent," but more importantly it shows an object "as if it were, from all sides at once."⁴⁰ It is this latter characteristic, the lack of a single perspective stance, that bears comparison to what happens with space in the icon.

While in *The Meaning of Idealism* Florensky's point of departure in the discussion of "synthetic vision" is specifically Hinton's writings and Picasso's paintings, and in "Reverse Perspective" it is the icon, it is clear that a distinction exists in Florensky's mind. In Florensky's view, the transition to higher forms of consciousness in Hinton's project of "higher consciousness" and in Cubist art is forced and artificial since it is not the result of the development of the individual who at a certain level of spiritual evolution naturally attains "synthetic vision." The latter is part of that Platonic understanding of the world and man which underlies Christianity.⁴¹ In the Platonic-Christian worldview, synthetic vision would be only possible when man's "spiritual vision" acquires the power to go beyond the "fleshly" (*plotskii*) sensible world.⁴²

The whole emphasis of Florensky's text moves away from the concrete instances of Theosophy and Cubism, which had provided the starting ground for the discussion of "synthetic vision," and goes back to the author's larger topic of idealism, specifically Platonic idealism. The possibility of developing a "new habit of seeing" (Plato, *Republic*, 517 E), a problem that interested the Theosophists, too, Florensky sees as already posed by Plato, most famously in the myth of the cave as—What does it mean "to see the ideas?"

36 Nicoletta Misler, "Pavel Florensky as Art Historian," in Florensky, *Beyond Vision*, 84-85.

37 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 98.

38 Hinton's earliest publication on the subject is "What Is the Fourth Dimension?" *Dublin University Magazine*, 1880, 15-34.

39 Charles Leadbeater, *The Astral Plane* (London: Lond. & c., 1895).

40 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 3-4.

41 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 99ff.

42 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 114.

His reply comes down to the notion that man has to develop his spiritual “capacity for mystical contemplation” and his ability to see Platonic Ideas “directly, face to face.”⁴³ The images revealed to man in this process of “mystical contemplation” are defined as four-dimensional—the terminology sounds inescapably close to Theosophy—and, as such, possessing “a higher degree of reality.”⁴⁴ This thinking, according to the Russian author, lies at the basis of a “generic method of looking at the world,” which is interested in the phenomenon “as a whole” and not only in “one moment of its history.”⁴⁵ Modern man has lost exactly this ability to experience “the world as a unified being.”⁴⁶ Thus, if art has a mission, it consists in restoring to humanity the ability to “see the wood behind the trees.”⁴⁷ This is the meaning of “synthetic vision,” and the principle of “supplementary planes” provides a visual expression of it.

Florensky’s passages on “synthetic vision” make direct references to Theosophical literature. At the same time, the author’s main concern is with putting the whole discussion within a framework that looks back to Plato’s philosophy and before. When Florensky poses the question: “Where does Platonism come from?” his answer is from magic or occultism.⁴⁸ This view acquires further significance against the background of Florensky’s understanding of Christianity as the heir of Platonism. The idea that Platonism derives from magic and occultism on the one hand and leads to Christianity on the other, had haunted Florensky for a long time and was to become a permanent feature of his thought. Already in his lecture of 17 September 1908 at the Theological Academy in Moscow, he speaks of his “thesis of the origin of Platonism from the magical world-view”⁴⁹ and of “the continuity of our spiritual culture from Platonism.”⁵⁰ This thesis, which defines Florensky’s worldview, is very probably one of the most interesting and most controversial aspects of the Russian writer’s oeuvre. Vasilenko has drawn attention to the problem of Florensky’s understanding of magic⁵¹ which begs the urgent question of the way in which magic or occultism fit into a profoundly Christian Orthodox sensibility. These issues still await further study.

Conclusion

This paper looked at a concrete and little known case of the influence of Theosophy in early 20th century Russia. Pavel Florensky’s concept of the “supplementary planes” of the icon in his classic essay “Reverse Perspective” grew out of the Theosophically-inspired notion of “synthetic vision” in *Smysl idealizma*, one of his less familiar texts.

Several themes emerged in the course of the discussion. Firstly, it was suggested that there is a tripartite connection between Theosophy, Orthodox iconography, and modernism,

43 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 13.

44 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 108.

45 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 110.

46 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 108.

47 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 115.

48 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 147.

49 Florensky, “Obshchechelovecheskie korni idealizma” (The Universal Roots of Idealism; 1908) in Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 148.

50 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 145.

51 Vasilenko, “O magii i okkul’tizme,” 86.

which is unique to Russia. In many ways, Theosophical concepts formed the bridge between Orthodox iconography and modernism. This is especially true of the similarities in the construction of pictorial space in Cubist images, on the one hand, and in medieval painting on the other. Florensky's two texts under discussion can only be understood by taking into account Theosophical notions of visuality.

Secondly, Florensky's application of ideas deriving from Theosophical writings, popular at the beginning of the 20th century, reflects a typically Russian reception of Theosophy. In the process, Theosophical notions become "Orthodoxized," i.e. they become part of a process which is profoundly Christian Orthodox.

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