

# Culture as an Environment of Cult: the Philosophy of Culture By P.A. Florensky

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**Abstract**—The paper is devoted to the disclosure of the symbolic nature of the philosophical and cultural views of P.A. Florensky, identifying the genesis and essence of the phenomenon of genuine culture, analyzing the nature of the relationship of "culture" and "nature." In the course of the study, the authors conclude that P.A. Florensky's worldview is quite reasonably called symbolism, since the philosopher emphasizes the symbolic character of the name and, together with the symbolists, emphasizes the theurgic nature of art and generally orients the philosophy towards the revival of theurgy.

**Keywords**—culture; cult; symbol; theurgy; theodicy; name; myth

## I. INTRODUCTION

In Russia, the first quarter of XX in the philosophy of culture is formed in extremely specific conditions. At this time, philosophical, artistic, social ideas acquire their certainty, while achieving the highest expressiveness [1]. It was during this period that the direction of religious metaphysics was finally determined, represented by the names of S.N. Bulgakov, N.A. Berdyaev, P.A. Florensky, D.S. Merezhkovsky, S.L. Frank, L.P. Karsavin, V.F. Ern, and others, whose work was based fundamentally on a number of approaches developed by V.S. Solovyov.

In the 20s of the last century, the main task of philosophy was the development of a new form of concrete unity of man with the higher spiritual meanings of culture, able to fill the "gap" between the immanent and transcendental ways of perceiving it. Philosophers are no longer limited to postulating the existence of the metaphysical structures of culture, paying more and more attention to the revelation of the existence of certain cultural events and phenomena [2].

Thus, the prominent Russian scientist, philosopher, and theologian Pavel Alexandrovich Florensky (1882-1937) believes that nature and culture do not exist as two irreconcilable opposites, but as inseparable integrity. Since culture is never given to us without its elemental basis, which serves it as the environment and matter. Even mighty technical installations, to a certain extent opposed to nature, would be impossible without the materials that nature provides. Culture is not born out of the air, outside of nature; at the basis of each of its phenomena lies a certain natural

phenomenon, "cultivated" by culture. Even fire — this gift of culture — is born from organic matter, from natural matter. Man, as a carrier of culture, creates nothing out of nothingness, but only forms and transforms the natural, elemental principle.

However, P.A. Florensky claims that nature is never gave to us without its cultural form, which limits it and makes it accessible to our knowledge. Nature does not enter into the human mind, does not become its possession unless it is first transformed by the corresponding cultural form. The philosopher gives the following example. We see in the sky not just stars, but a certain constellation, for example, the Big Dipper. However, this name was not given by nature, but by a man who, observing through the prism of culture, saw something in the sky that reminded him of a huge bear. Constellation is the form that is given to nature by culture.

## II. MEANINGS OF CULTURE

The research of P.A. Florensky in the field of culture is specific. And through them — like through ceramic remains, ornaments, medieval frescoes and icons — the "common course of history" sprouts. For example, the thinker notes, statues that emphasize certain features of the body, do not leave "not the slightest doubt in non-randomness" of exaggerations or understatement: "What may seem like a simple consequence of a weak sculptor technique actually turns out to be a very conscious effort to express some idea" [3].

In "At the watersheds of thought" (1918), he interprets the world of technology and the world of culture created by man as an "organ-projection" of human feelings and thinking. Technique and the world of culture, in general, are a projection of human sensuality, expanding it and presenting new possibilities to it. The philosopher fills the culture with religious content: the world, already created and constantly created by man, is the continuation and deployment of human feelings and thinking, and this process is completed by building a temple that embodies not only the synthesis of various arts but also sacred being. Each thing surrounding a person, each object of culture by its being expresses the wealth of human subjectivity and at the same time aims at the divine being. This is all the more true of the icon and the

temple, therefore P.A. Florensky calls his worldview "concrete idealism."

Defining culture as an activity on the organization of our space (technology is the organization of the space of life, science is a mental model of reality), the scientist comprehensively explores the spatial and temporal organization of artistic and visual works, primarily painting and graphics, as well as direct and reverse perspective in icons and painting works.

If technology is an activity that organizes the space of life relations, and philosophy and science are mental models of the organization of reality, then art is a special form of reorganization in order to give the physical reality status of spiritual being. Through the analysis of various types of pictorial perspective — "direct" and "reverse" — P.A. Florensky identifies two opposing constructions of art and culture.

The worldview, based on a "direct" perspective, "is not a fact of perception, but only a requirement, in the name of some, perhaps very strong, but resolutely abstract considerations" [4]. The "direct" perspective stems from the subject and is devoid of organization, through it "the content of the space is transmitted, but not its organization ..." The philosopher connects the success of secular, secularized art with different variations in the distribution of the direct perspective, and, in a more global and historical sense, the achievements of the culture of the Renaissance and the New Age. On the contrary, a religious culture, the task of building which is transferred by the philosopher to the future, is objective and contains in itself the properties not of an empirical, but of a spiritual space. It happens just because of the "reverse perspective." Specific forms of religious culture, such as temple activities, iconography, and others, reveal the special spatial-symbolic image of the world expressed in them, linking specific historical realities with relevant spiritual experience. Defending the concept of organic meaning and form, the rootedness of this synthesis in the depths of the universal human experience of comprehending the spirit, P.A. Florensky essentially proves the futility of efforts to artificially invent forms of culture, the futility of attempts at violence over the "cultural" space.

Thus, for the Russian philosopher, the meanings of culture are no longer abstract entities, but are "clumps of being" that exist by their own laws and reveal themselves to comprehension as an especially internally organized cultural reality. P.A. Florensky considers this principle of unity of meaning and form as a qualitative criterion of culture and the basis of its typology.

### III. CULT CHARACTER OF CULTURE

One of the most important culturological categories born in the depths of the ontological concept of culture is the concept of "cult". The intuition of a cult predetermines many philosophical constructions (N.A. Berdyaev, S.N. Bulgakov, L.P. Karsavin, S.L. Frank, A.F. Losev), but the main merit in the development of this problem undoubtedly belongs to P.A. Florensky which links culture with the cult. He begins to develop this approach both in his first works (for example,

"The Pillar and the Ground of the Truth" (1914), and in one of his last works — *The Philosophy of the Cult*, "written in the early 20s and published in the 1977 year). The cult is understood by him as a certain first-act of life, which predetermines and directs the whole set of both practical and theoretical human actions. This unity is concluded in liturgical activity, where the formation of sacred values and the manufacture of sacred tools, the function of which is the direct union of ideas (noumena) and things (phenomena). Therefore, the meaning of cult action is comprehended in the direction "from top to bottom", from the transcendent to the immanent. Through the lens of a cult, any action of culture and art is recognized as a concrete way of organizing matter in the laws of the "earthly" space and time, and as a concrete idea, spliced with the ideal space and time of the Absolute. Such a meeting of dissimilar substances appears in the mind of man as an antinomy, which, in turn, becomes the reference point of the mind, both in theoretical and practical areas of life [5]. Cult action presents to consciousness unconditional, but not synthetic unity of the personality with being, causing "amazement" and encouraging the development of philosophy; it breeds "fear", "trembling" and "reverence", thereby forming the basis of religious feeling.

According to P.A. Florensky, the need for human existence is represented in his free creativity in its entirety of its empirical content, i.e. in the circle of the world of culture created by him. At the same time, man rises above the empirical conditions of his existence and his activity. This is the proof of the non-empirical (divine) nature of his being and his creativity. The divine world is found in his freedom and his work. Every work of man is the revelation of God to man and man to God.

According to P.A. Florensky, the process of the genesis of culture is defined as follows: a cult is first formed, and then a myth, verbally explaining the effect and necessity of the cult and expressed in a set of concepts, formulas, and terms, and seeking independence, arise. Thus, culture is education, a participial cult of genesis, and cultural values are "derivatives of the cult". According to the apt remark of the philosopher, "a truly great culture begins with" by the holy poker "or" neither, nor "cult and to the cult, therefore, it is oriented either positively or negatively. The cult is not only the beginning but also the core of culture, which predetermines its entire content. Through the cult, the ontological unity of culture and the concentration of the metaphysical principles of its being at each particular moment of its occurrence are realized. In this sense, the cult overcomes the culture; the cult is a peculiar sphere of non-cultural activity, concentrating the criteria for its understanding and existence. "Cultural" phenomena are, therefore, nothing more than the "hardening" of cultural action and detachment from the latter. Based on the foregoing, the hierarchy becomes a natural way of organizing various classes of cultural existence, and proximity or remoteness in relation to a cult acts as a measure of the "consistency" of culture [6].

So, it is the awareness of the role of the cult nature of culture both in terms of its genesis, and in the aspect of its semantic integrity and indivisibility, turns out to be the

inevitable moment of the selection of the substance of culture, as well as the classification of individual cultural types. Beyond the cult foundation, culture loses objective reality. According to P.A. Florensky, the experience of the historical development of a number of cultures shows that, due to the violation by man and society of subtle patterns of communication between cult and culture, the latter is destroyed, and the cult itself degenerates either into ritual and ritual acts, or into theoretical and schematization production.

#### IV. CULTURE: THE SELF-SUPPORTING WORLD OF VALUES

The very way of philosophizing of P.A. Florensky is a way of putting the human, bodily, material into the very thought of God, into the truth, into the absolute mind. When the effort of thinking, aimed at the very beginnings of the search, the cultural and historical breaks through natural and corporeal, the human mind is either in a state of communion to the truth, or in a state of discord with her. In the latter case, "the soul loses its substantial unity, loses the consciousness of its creative nature, is lost in the chaotic whirlwind of its own states" [7]. The state of communion can be called the "daytime" consciousness, the situation of disintegration - the "night". "The integral life-perception of the cultural Aeon does not adjoin the century of the previous night, but to the previous-previous century of the day and closes all the days with one, possibly continuous, succession" [8]. Here the thinker defines the historical stages as cultural eons, i.e. as well as N.A. Berdyaev, he discovers an alternative to the external, natural world in a culture, by which is meant the transformation of a thing into an idea of a thing, the transformation of earthly, coarse, material flesh into "holy flesh."

P.A. Florensky produces the etymology of the Latin word *cultura* from *cultus*. The culture is that "from the cult, it is completely detached as if the cult will germinate, its sprouts, its lateral stems. A shrine is the primary creativity of a person; cultural values are derivatives of a cult"[9]. Culture in different concepts is conceived as a self-sufficient world of values, as something self-legal and self-sufficient. Such an approach is unacceptable for a philosopher since there are no criteria for distinguishing between what belongs to the world of culture and what does not belong to this world. Values are transformed either into idols or into imitations and fakes of authentic culture. For him, culture is "weathered shrines".

Culture, according to P.A. Florensky, approved on certain unshakable grounds, so he rejects the idea of the development and evolution of culture. This foundation is the cult, Theurgy (the art of God-giving — auth.). The philosopher builds the following chain: faith determines the cult, and the cult — the worldview, from which culture follows. Having found that culture grows from the totality of shrines, in this way he defines the cult, which, being unshakable, also predetermines the impossibility of culture to be radically updated, P.A. Florensky at the same time could not ignore the fact of the removal of modern culture from religion. Therefore, he designates such a state of affairs as the alienation of culture from its origins, as blackout by its pseudo-values of Western civilization.

Genuine culture always involves the isolation of criteria for assessing the values of culture, and these criteria go beyond the boundaries of culture and lead to religion. Culture is an environment of the cult, but not the cult itself [10].

So, culture, in its essence unchangeable, is typologically presented in two forms: Renaissance and Medieval. The latter is integral, sublime, for it is rooted in the idea of God, as the center of being. The first, on the contrary, is fragmented and superficial, since it is postulated as the center of man. To highlight the foundations of the Renaissance-type culture in order to chart ways to overcome it, P.A. Florensky makes the reduction of the Renaissance culture to Kantianism, and Kantianism to Protestantism, which marks the denial of true medieval culture. Anti-religious, Western civilization, Western Christianity, rationalism — these are the single-root phenomena of the Renaissance type of culture, negatively characterized by the philosopher in the spirit of Slavophilism.

#### V. SYMBOL IS "PART, EQUAL TO A WHOLE"

Noting the symptoms of stagnation of the Renaissance culture, the thinker predicts the return of the medieval type, one of the most characteristic features of which is the trend towards unity. This trend will require the synthesis of absolutely all human abilities, all spheres of realization of the human spirit into a kind of "holistic knowledge", on the one hand, to comprehend the "unity of everything with everything", the wise Divine plan for the world (Sophia) and, on the other hand, compliance activities of this principle.

There is a path of the descent of divine reality into the matter of culture and a path of ascent from culture to God. The beginning of the path of the ascent of culture to God is the tools of labor, the instruments of creating material well-being and the weapon of protecting our life: "we call culture the totality of the tools of production and the concepts of worldview available to a given people in this era" [11]. However, culture is not limited to works of material production. P.A. Florensky emphasizes the importance of verbal creativity: "human activity, or culture ... is essentially verbal, and this is not only in the sense that human actions are accompanied by a word, have a verbal explanation, but also in an incomparably deeper meaning of inner permeation with the word" [12]. However, for him the word is not a sign, but a symbol — the living penetration of two energies — the energy of man and the energy of God.

As P.A. Florensky writes, "a symbol would cease to be a symbol and would become in our consciousness a simple and independent reality that is in no way connected with the symbolized, if the description of reality would have its only reality: the description must the kind and symbolic character of the symbols themselves, i.e. special effort to keep all the time at once with the symbol and with the symbolized"[13].

The symbol turns out to be an unusually successful structure, which makes it possible to see the involvement of human beings in the Absolute and to single out the very borderline of the transcendental and immanent realms of reality, i.e. their meeting place, as a special sphere. "Being



that is larger than itself is the basic definition of a symbol," notes P.A. Florensky. "A symbol is something that not itself, greater than it, but, however, it is essential to declare it through it" [14]. The formally accepted notion of a symbol is revealed as a dual unity of "symbolizing", represented by a substance or phenomenon, and "symbolized", expressed in an idea or noumena, in which between an idea and a thing there is not just a semantic, but also real identity. According to the definition of P.A. Florensky, a symbol is "a part equal to the whole", but "the whole is not equal to a part". At the same time, the symbol is a component contained in reality, which literally has the ability to open the Absolute in a particular. This is the source of its inexhaustibility; it is inadequate to everything that it is. As an ontological basis of culture, a symbol allows a person to create the universe; it can design and organize the life of an individual. Reflecting the other side of human beings, which precedes its "consistency" and, at the same time, being its "other-being" structure, the symbol constantly shifts and pushes the boundaries of "cultural certainties" [15]. Such a provision allows the philosopher to characterize the symbol as the substantial identity of the metaphysical and physical, as a really "antinomic" formation actually present in reality. However, the antinomy of P.A. Florensky does not qualify as an objection to the symbol, but, on the contrary, as "a pledge of their truth." Such a crossing of the phenomenological and ontological understanding of symbols leads him to the following statement: the symbols lie "outside the limits of rationalistic understanding," which can be qualified as a distinctive feature of the national structure of the phenomenology of culture as a whole. Its characteristic feature is the initial displacement from the environment of the process of describing culture to the isolation of the foundations of the "structure" of the act of description itself, which, in turn, is, in essence, a "cultural" action. The emphasis here is on the one-step internal connectedness of the one who describes, with what is being described. In other words, from the "event" of culture, the philosopher's thought goes into the depths of "being", approaching the foundations of what gives rise to the principle of transition from being to an event, i.e. any involvement in culture. Such an original way of the rootedness of the dialectic process in the ontological foundations of the world is largely determined by the fact that the religiously oriented philosophy is inherently inclined to consider "cultural" formation from the perspective of the deployment of its "position".

The "symbolic" vision of reality represents its own structure in a new way. Each symbol identifies and isolates a completely specific part of the ontological nature of the world. In essence, symbols are "metaphysical constants" contained in the structure of reality; evidence that the "being" introduces the "is being". And if previously historically "real" something was declared — or the "being" of culture, or its "existing" — then with the emergence of the foundations of philosophical symbolism, these two approaches finally succeed in combining.

On the one hand, the reality in general and the reality of culture, in particular, are defined as a specific series of symbolic formations with different semantic meanings. The

unity of culture with man, like the unity of being of the individual as a whole, is maintained by symbolic substances. On the other hand, the description of symbols through symbols affirms the knowledge of cultural metaphysics along with the knowledge of its "physics". Culture is thought of as a process that primarily encompasses the activity of the individual as being symbolic: the phenomena of culture by means of symbols are embodied immediately in the matter and in the idea. However, the essence of culture is revealed in the practice of finding symbols, their description, and typology, as well as in activities to recreate the optimal conditions for the functioning of symbols as symbols [16].

## VI. CONCLUSION

P.A. Florensky's worldview is justifiably called symbolism — he emphasizes the symbolic character of the name, together with the symbolists emphasizes the theurgic nature of art and generally orients the philosophy towards the revival of theurgy.

P.A. Florensky, for whom there is a direct connection between the concept of the "Whole" of culture and its ultimate singular concreteness imprinted in the "Name" of culture, stresses: "When there is no sensation of world reality, then the unity of the universal consciousness and then the unity of the self-conscious personality dissolves" [17]. The whole of culture is recreated through the organs of our communication with reality, through which we come into contact with what was "cut off until then from our consciousness," that is, through characters and names.

The "names", which are characterized by the highest integrity, are the "foci" of thought and social energy, and therefore they are the highest value. Humanity believes them, proving their faith by preserving their names. It is impossible to invent them, how to invent new religions. Thanks to the name, the process of cognition is possible: the connection of the knower with the known, with the known substance, is accomplished by means of the name". Each renaming "overturns" the depths of culture and begins a new line of historical typology, but at the same time, the former name remains in the building, in the spiritual stock of the individual. Thus, in the name appears all-human experience; and by "us," in us, through us, history itself speaks.

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