SOPHIA OR MODERNITY?: THE REVERSE PERSPECTIVE IN PAVEL FLORENSKY AS A CRITIQUE OF MODERN NATURALISM

Introduction: Sophia, sapientia, science

The relation between wisdom and science is one of the main tensions characterizing the development of modernity in the West. The increase of scientific reason from the fifteenth century on was at the same time the beginning of a process in which the classical ideal of theoria lost its meaning for the rational understanding of reality. The critique of nominalistic philosophy on the divine origin of general concepts disabled the human mind to grasp the real essence of being and as such to develop a global vision, delivering the measure for understanding the ultimate meaning of nature and practical life. Until early modernity Sophia or sapientia remained the ultimate goal of all scientific enterprise, both of moral and theoretical investigations. The ideal referred to the moral virtue, necessarily belonging to every act of the mind and relating the human being to divine activity. Since then, however, sapientia has no longer been understood as the starting point, framework or goal of all rationality. Although the great encyclopedic projects in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as they were elaborated by Carolus Bovillus (1479-1567), Johann Heinrich Alsted (1588-1638) or Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680) can be interpreted as attempts to restore the broken bond between wisdom and science, this ideal found its end at least with Descartes’ Discours de la méthode (1637) and finally lead to the strong separation of practical and theoretical life as can be found in Kant’s philosophy. Of course, wisdom did not disappear completely in the Western tradition, but the ideal was reduced to its subjective and individual dimensions. Wisdom was now a quality of a person, independent from its scientific interests and reasoning. In the Eastern, orthodox tradition, however, more influenced by (neo) platonist Byzantine thinking, the ideal of Sophia seemed to remain more present. At least at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries the concept of Sophia was rediscovered, in the so-called “Silver Age,” as the basis of practical and theoretical

1. Parts of this article are result of my stay at VLAC, the Flemish Centre for Advanced Studies at the Royal Flemish Academy for Science and the Arts, Brussels, in 2007.

sciences. One of the main representatives of the renaissance of Sophia was, without doubt, the mathematician, physician, theologian and art historian Pavel Florensky (1882-1937?). As in a few other authors, the work of this fascinating thinker demonstrates the firm critical attitude towards modernity, which motivates the renewal of Sophia.

The opposition between central and reverse perspective and the problem of modernity

In this article I will discuss this criticism by way of analyzing Florensky’s famous attack on the central perspective, which dominated the Western painting tradition since the days of Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472). In the view of Florensky, the increasing role of the central perspective in Western art is one of the main phenomena demonstrating the degeneration of wisdom in modernity. According to Florensky, the central perspective is an expression of the modern human illusion to create and control reality without any external, divine limit. The central perspective is the death of all real human creativity, which is driven by reality itself – this means in the view of Florensky: divine reality.³ The Russian theologian and physician presents the “reverse perspective” as it is found in traditional religious iconography, as an alternative painting “technique,” which, contrary to the central perspective, expresses living – and therefore: true – reality.⁴ The comparison between the Renaissance perspective and the religious iconography shows – according to Florensky – the extreme narrow character of modern rationality, of which the subjectivism of Descartes and Kant is the most radical expression. The history of perspective shows how modernity has increasingly lost every reference to the divine and therefore all orientation towards reality. According to Florensky, the return to the religious, theocentric iconography seems to offer the only way to escape the prison of the central perspective, in which all creativity comes to an end.

The strong opposition between the anthropocentric perspective of modern art and thinking on the one hand, and the theocentric ideal of reality on the other certainly has some attractive and relevant aspects, such as when it is seen in the context of the discussions in art history of the 1920s, concerning the use of perspective, initiated by Erwin Panofsky.⁵ Nevertheless one may ask whether Florensky is right in arguing that the discovery of the central perspective in Renaissance art really implies the loss of transcendence in human perception and living. As long as Florensky’s analysis of perspective remains within the opposition of the “central” and “reverse” perspective, the latter is

⁴. See Florensky, Die umgekehrte Perspektive, p. 70 and passim.