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The Pair Movement-Rest in Plotinus and Maximus the Confessor

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Introduction

In this short text which follows we will compare the neoplatonic system in its dynamic form - which for the Christians thinkers as Maximus the Confessor wasn't sufficiently intense - with the Christian notion of movement. Maximus broke the cyclic pair of neoplatonic movement-rest, speaking for a movable and social God. As the source of love and energy, God tends towards beings of the sensible world in the frames of His economic project for them. In general, we can see the Maximian philosophy of movement in relation both with Parmenides, Plato and Origen, who attributed the immobility to the real being, considering movement as a fall, and in relation with Heraclitus, who believed that everything are in motion.[1] Maximus connected the immobility of uncreated reality with the movement of created, in the Aristotelian sense of the "unmoved mover". But surpassed Aristotle and attributed movement to the divine nature of Christ and in general to Divinity. Every being in this world and in the world beyond has movement. Maximus makes the use of the super-names for God, taking from the neoplatonism both the superlative and the apophatic way of thinking. God is over our definitions of Him and so He is unlimited; but at the most desirable end, in the ascend towards Him, we cannot loose ourselves, because movement never stops. At the most desirable end, we have progress and movement inside identity (*Progressus in idem*).

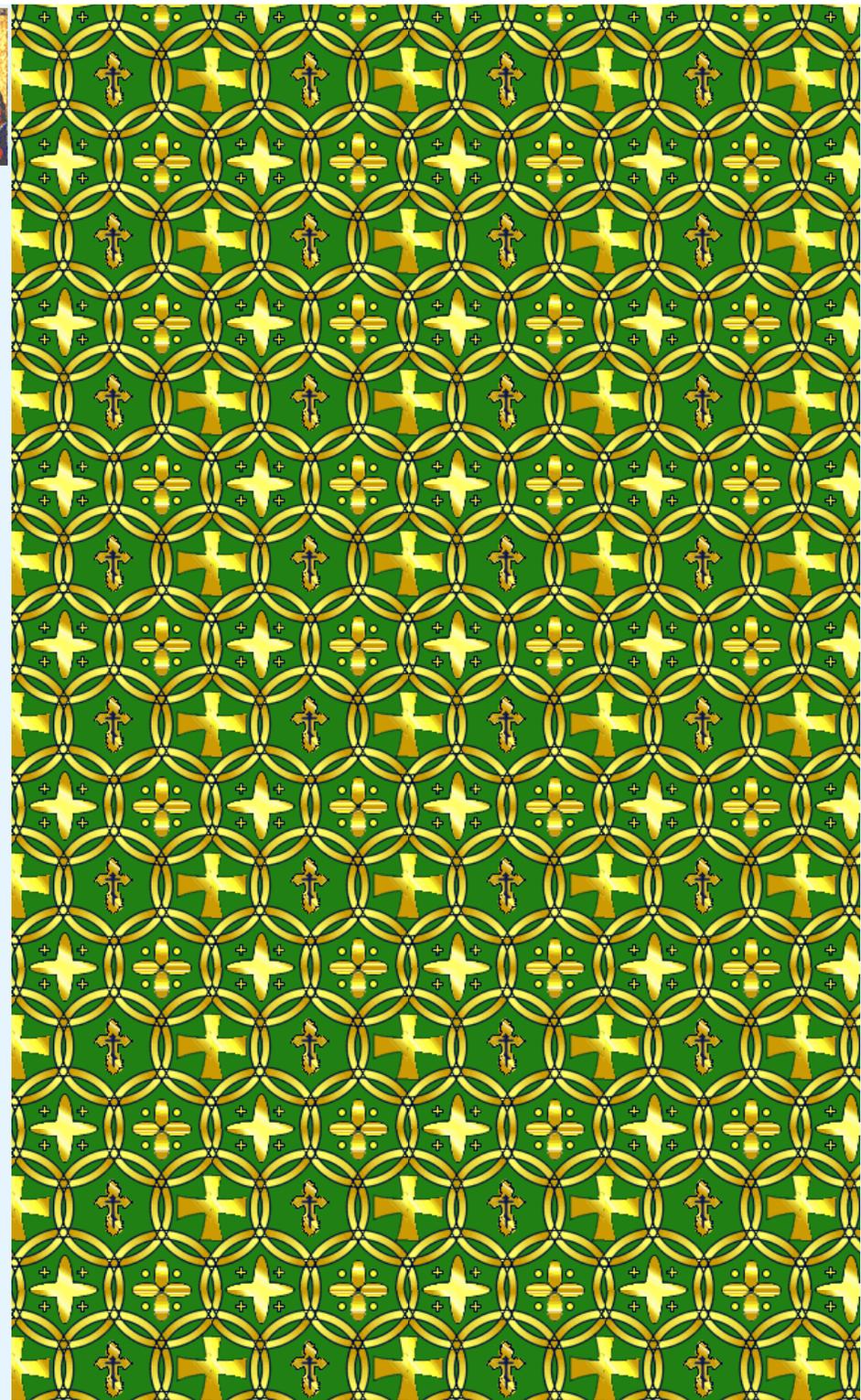
The philosophy of movement and rest

According to the Ancient Greek Philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, God is static and immovable. This happens because movement characterizes mainly the world of becoming and so the imperfect beings. God as perfect and as the principal Being has to be characterized by immobility and rest.[2]

For Plato movement is a process towards perfection, either of the formless matter which search for the perfect form in the realm of becoming, either of the intellectual ascent from the sensible to the intelligible (the world of Ideas). God because He belongs in the intelligible realm is characterized by immobility and rest.

For Aristotle movement is a process from the virtually being to the actually being. And because the virtually being is for him the matter, as the only being that can become something else, movement is attributed to the sensible objects, which are composite by matter and form. God as the principal Intellect has not matter and form; He is a pure "actually being" without having movement.

The Stoicism and Neoplatonism, as concerning the nature and the character of God, are exceptions in Greek Philosophy. Plotinus, who was the founder of Neoplatonism (3rd century A.D.), derived the five "greatest genera" of Plato's *Sophists*[3]- being, movement, rest, identity, difference - and placed them in the intelligible world.[4] For Plotinus the relation between the three hypostases -



One, Intellect, Soul – is dynamic. So God or One or Good on top of hierarchy of hypostases through the process of emanation produces the world vertically. God's emanation has as its outcome the lower hypostases towards the sensible world. Well, this structure of the levels of reality is not a static system, but it has movement and energy. The inverse process inside this metaphysical system is possible for the human souls, which had fallen, taking their place into the bodies. So we have a kind of movement from God or One towards the lower world and the reverse movement of the souls toward God, which is the most desired object by every being. The questions which are raised here are: a) what is the nature of that God's movement and b) when the soul arrives again back to God, does it stay immobile into an ecstatic rest or not?

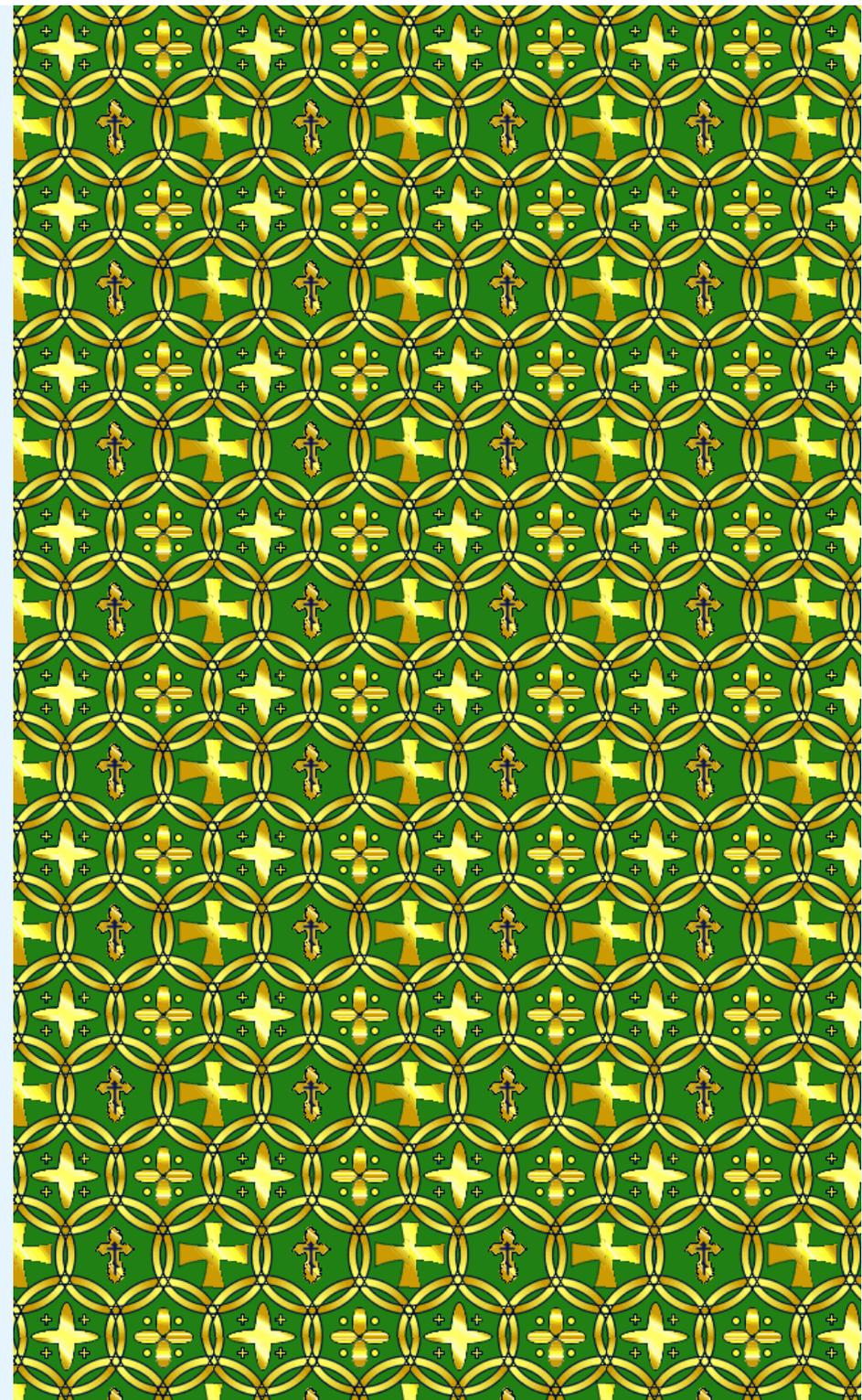
We can find the same neoplatonic dynamic structure in the writings of many Christian Theologians. A distinct example is the case of Origen. He incorporated that neoplatonic metaphysical dynamism and he accepted the pre-existence of Souls in a divine place before their fall down to the earth. For Origen this fall is a kind of movement. Consequently the Christian theologian Origen – for whom Porphyrius believed mistakenly that he had the same teacher with Plotinus in Alexandria[5] – reached the conclusion that movement is evil as the cause of the sinful mingle of the souls with the bodies.[6]

Maximus the Confessor in his work, which was known in the West as *Ambigua*, reformed and made a refutation of Origen's doctrine. He changed the order of Origenic triad "abode-movement-becoming" and he placed first the term "becoming", second the "movement" and third the "rest" inside God.[7] So we can observe that Maximus maintained the neoplatonic structure, changing the order of the names in the triad.

There are many scholars who observed the origin of the Maximus's pair movement-rest in the writings of Plotinus, who in his *Enneads* VI.2 and elsewhere he insists, as Plato did, on the theory that movement belongs to the sensible and perishable world, while rest must be attributed to the beings of intelligible. Jose Julian Prado observed that Plotinus prefers the term rest (*stasis*) for the intelligible "genera", which are by its nature immovable (*akineta*), and the world stillness (*eremia*) for these which are movable (*kinoumena*), but for some reason rest or have come to a stop.[8]

J.J.Prado following especially the works of Hans Urs Von Balthasar[9] believed that the dualistic opposition sensible/intelligible=movement/rest was acceptable literally by Maximus. But what is the nature of God? Is He moving or not? Plotinus although he surpassed the clear platonic dichotomy between sensible-movement/intelligible-rest and he rejected the attributes static and immovable to God, he doesn't insist on His absolute freedom and spontaneous movement towards the lower hypostases. Although in his treatise VI.8 (On free will and the will of the One) he speaks for the voluntary motion of God towards his creatures, he insists on that God doesn't need us (*eman ouk ephietai*).[10] In fact, for neoplatonism, God creates the world, due to His spontaneous overflowing, but He hasn't the generosity of the Christian God.[11] So the neoplatonic God doesn't go outside His substance because He is sufficient in Himself. Of course Plotinus accepts the free will and the voluntary tension of the One, but the free will of God hasn't so great power due to the lack of any personalistic meaning, in the way that we find it in the existential doctrine of Christianity. The free will of God was studied by Plotinus along with the free will of man (*to ephemin*).[12] And it is only in the writings of Plotinus, the *Enneads* that we meet for first time the word *thelesis* as another term with different meaning for the notion of the will.[13] This same word obtained a crucial significance in the writings of Maximus the Confessor against the monotheletism.[14]

It is also in the metaphysical course of man, which is the return towards God, where we can find again the word rest (*stasis*). It is about the journey of the human soul through its ecstatic movement to God. God is the most desired end, not only by the individual souls, but also, in the eschatological perspective, by all mankind and by all nature.



So we have two kinds of movement and two kinds of rest. The first movement is the neoplatonic emanation and the Christian creation by God. The second movement is the movement of return to God which concerns all the souls and entire Universe. Accordingly we have one kind of platonic and origenistic rest inside God before His movement – because God created the Universe *ex nihilo* for the Christians Fathers[15] and as we saw, Maximus places first the act of "becoming" (*genesis*) and second the notion of "movement" (*kinesis*), although every act presupposes a kind of movement, even *genesis*. Second, everything has to go back to its source and its proper end that is in the rest inside God. [16]

We can observe in Maximus's doctrine of movement and consequently of the social character of God, an intensity and a persistence. As for the return and the ascent of the soul to God, it is a kind of reverse movement. In Maximus's *Ambigua* the neoplatonic "cyclic dance", that is the idea of the eternal cyclic movement of time – which found its expression in the hierarchical ontological system of hypostases – breaks, because we have a total different conception of movement and rest. Also exists the neoplatonic apothatic way of thinking (the formula "neither-nor"), especially in Dionysius the Areopagite[17] as regarding movement and rest in the relation between man and God (that is, there is neither motion, nor rest of the human mind inside God and neither God is moving, nor He is in rest), along with the notion of "immovable motion" or similar contradictory expressions about the divine condition.[18] The same aspect of the intelligible world is appeared as "movement immovable" (*kinesis akinetos*) in Plotinus; but this is not a proper expression for One or God.[19]

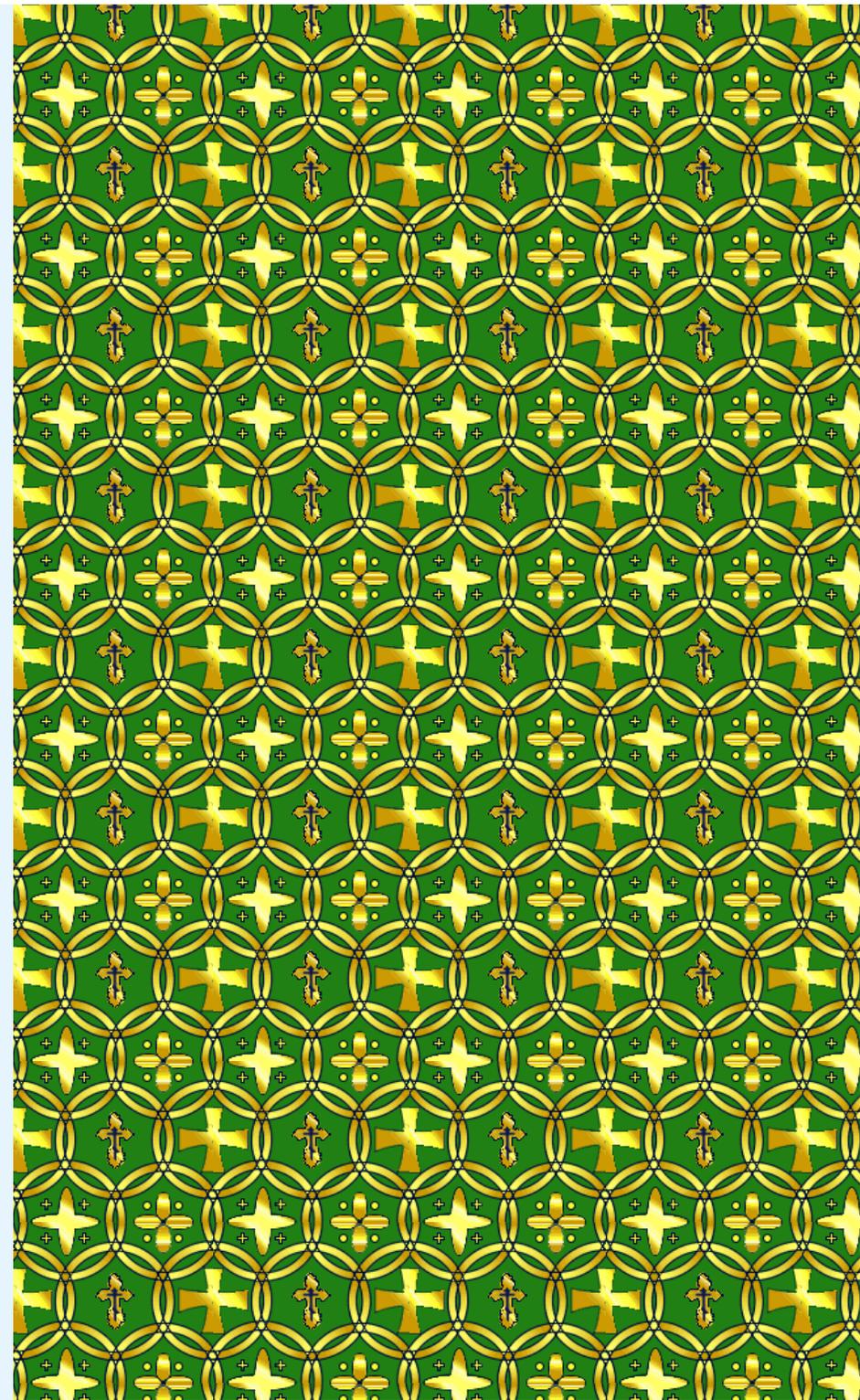
Conclusion

It is known that the Christians thinkers in the latter decades of the 20th century put emphasis on the historicity of the Christian conception of God, in opposition with the static and rational conception of God in Ancient Greek Philosophy. The idea of a personal, social and mobile God finds its culmination in maximian philosophy of movement. With the apophatic way of thinking (neither motion, neither rest) or with contradictory expressions ("immovable motion" or "continually movable rest") as regarding the ascent to God and the phenomenon of creation, Maximus surpassed the origenistic and neoplatonic similar and, simultaneously, different ideas.

It is exactly because God is moving and He doesn't stay immovable and self-sufficient in Him, that the historicity was introduced. This latter started by the personal presentation of God to the Judaic people and passed in the Christian linear conception, which broke the Greek circle. In the case of Plotinus the "immovable movement" is not attributed to God but only to the intelligible world.

The activity of God for Maximus is a free expression of His sovereignty, but it is also an expression of His condescension towards humankind, as already manifested in His creation and His subsequent acts of salvation. The maximian doctrine of creation and of salvation as being motion of God towards created beings and motion of the ensouled human beings towards God is to be understood against the general Greek negation of the possibility of movement in the perfect Being.[20]

In this effort to find another basis for a positive and optimistic understanding of divine movement, Maximus used the neoplatonic triadic interpretation which he felt free to see as indications of Divine Reality. Although Maximus did not accept the neoplatonic emanation in his understanding of creation and in the Trinitarian mystery, he was able to use it. The mystery remains hidden, but God becomes available to human thought through revelation. Thus the triadic speculations of Neoplatonism and its dynamic structure, mediated through Pseudo-Dionysius, helped Maximus both to refute Origenism and to accept movement – in relation to rest – as a special category for Cristian thought as "wisdom about God".[21]



Notes:

[1] Maximus the Confessor, *Philosophical and Theological Questions (Ambigua)*. Introduction-Comments by D. Staniloae. Translation I.Sakalis, Ed. Apostolic Deaconry of the Church of Greece, Athens, 1990, 33 and note 21; see also 18-27 (In Greek)

[2] Plato, *Timaeus* 57e-58a and Aristotle, *Physics* 11 1073a

[3] Plato, *Sophist* 245D-257A

[4] Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI.2

[5] We shouldn't make confusion between the platonic Origen who had the same teacher with Plotinus and the Christian Origen. This error is due to Porphyrius, who had heard, when he was young, the Christian Origen to speak about his teacher Ammonius. But that latter wasn't the same person with Ammonius Sakkas the teacher of Plotinus. Porphyrius, *The life of Plotinus*, 3.6-13 and Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* VI 19.5-7

[6] P.Sherwood, *The Earlier Ambigua of Saint Maximus the Confessor and his Refutation of Origenism*. "Orbis Catholicus", Herder, Romae, 1955, 92

[7] P.Sherwood, *ibid* 92-3

[8] We can find rest (*stasis*) in Plato's *Sophist* and the term stillness (*eremia*) in Aristotle's *Physics* V 6, 229D-231a. See J.J.Prado, *Voluntad y Naturaleza. La antropología filosófica de Maximo el Confesor*. Ediciones de la Universidad Nacional de Rio Cuarto. Rio Cuarto, Argentina, 1974, 121-122. Cf. C. Evangeliou, *Aristotle's Categories and Porphyry*. Philosophia Antiqua. A series of studies on Ancient Philosophy. Ed. By W.J.Verdenius and J.C.M. Van Winden. Vol. XLVIII. E.Brill, Leiden, 1988, 161 and Plotinus, *Enneads* VI.3.27

[9] H. U. von Bathasar, *Liturgie Cosmique. Maxime le Confesseur*. Traduit de l'allemand par L. Lhaumet et H.-A.Prentout. Ed. Montaigne, Paris, 1947,104

[10] Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI.9.8.36

[11] A. Kellesidou-Galanos, «Preuves de l'Existence et Nature du Premier chez Plotin». *PHILOSOPHIA*. 5-6, 1975-6, 366. Cf. E.R.Dodds, "Tradition and Personal Achievement in the Philosophy of Plotinus", *Journal of Roman Studies*, 50, 1960, 1-7. See also J. Trouillard, *La Purification Plotinienne*. Press Universitaires de France, Paris, 1955, 94-104 and A.H.Armstrong, "Salvation, Plotinian and Christian" *The Downside Review* 75 (No. 240). Bath, 1957, 126-139

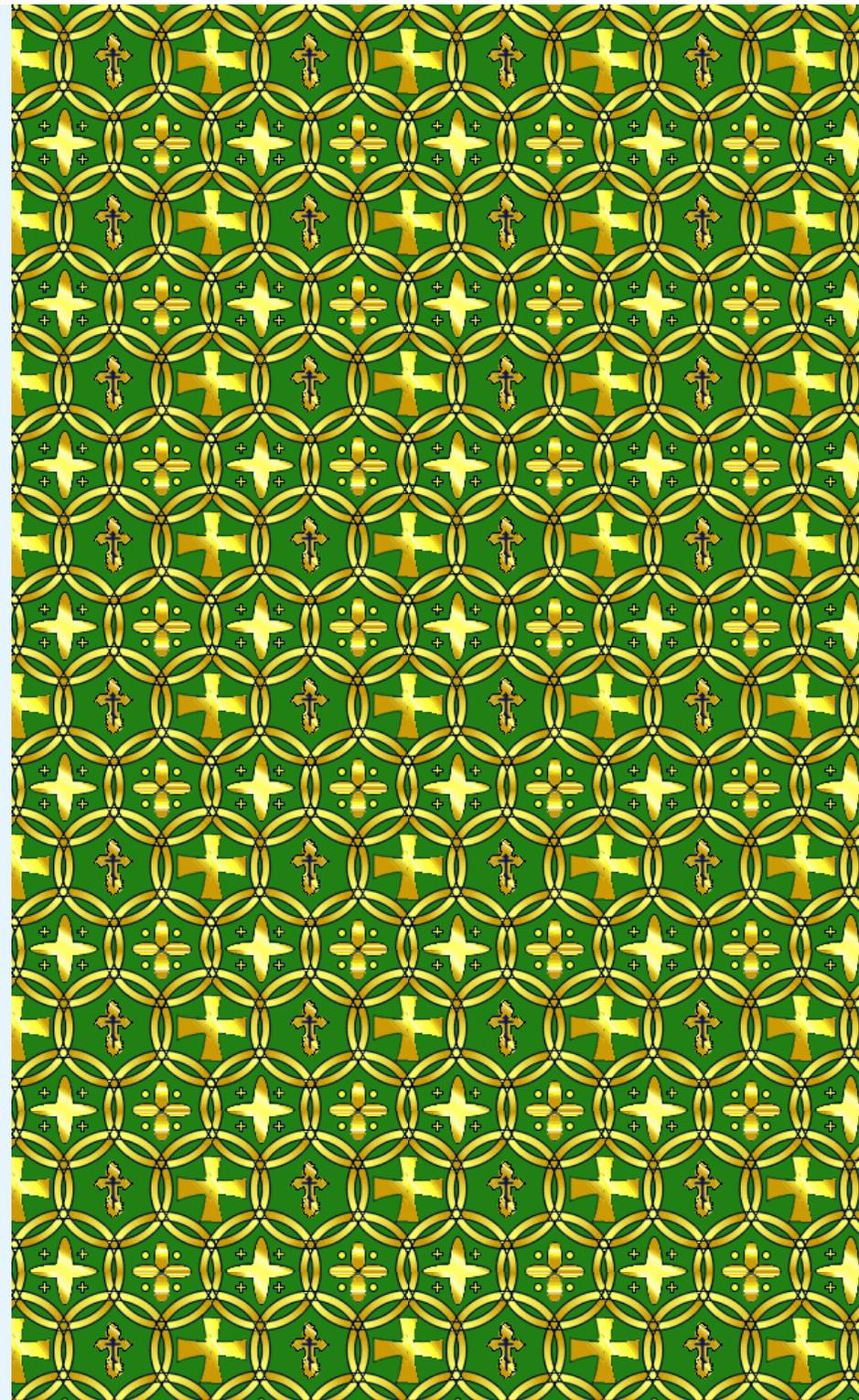
[12] Plotinus, *Enneads* VI.8.2-6

[13] J. D. Madden, "The Authenticity of Early Definitions of Will (*thelesis*)" in *Maximus the Confessor. Actes du Symposium sur Maxime le Confesseur. Friburg, 2-5 septembre 1980*. Ed. Par F. Heinzer et C.Schönborn. Edition Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1982, 61-79

[14] Maximus defended the two energies and the two *thelesis* (will) of Christ against the monoenergetism and the monotheletism. N. Loudovicos, *The Ontology of Holy Eucharist*. Ed. Domos, Athens, 1992, 222-229 (In Greek). Cf. J. J. Prado, *Voluntad y naturaleza*, loc. cit. 183-265

[15] *Genesis* 1, 1-28 and Basil the Great, *Exaameron*, 2, 3, P.G. 29, 33B. Cf. Gregory of Nyssa P.G. 44, 72D-72A

[16] We have to remark here how close are the philosophy of neoplatonism and



Christian Theology and how similar the notions of motion and rest are in them, but simultaneously so different

[17] *Mystical Theology* 5, P.G. 3, 1054. This is the hermeneutical point of view in J.J.Prado and H.U. von Balthasar.

[18] N. Loudovicos, loc. cit. 242-3

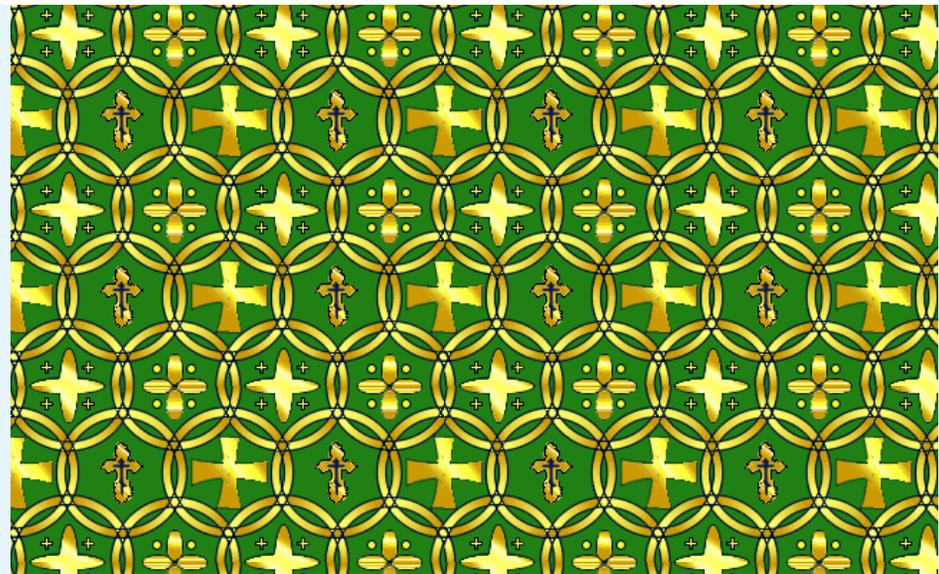
[19] Plotinus, *Enneads* VI.2

[20] L. Thunberg, *Man and Cosmos. The Vision of St. Maximus the Confessor.* With a Foreword by A.M. Allchin. St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York, 1985, 31-32

[21] L. Thunberg, *ibid*, 32

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