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The Concept of Unbounded and Evil Matter in Plotinus and John Damascenus

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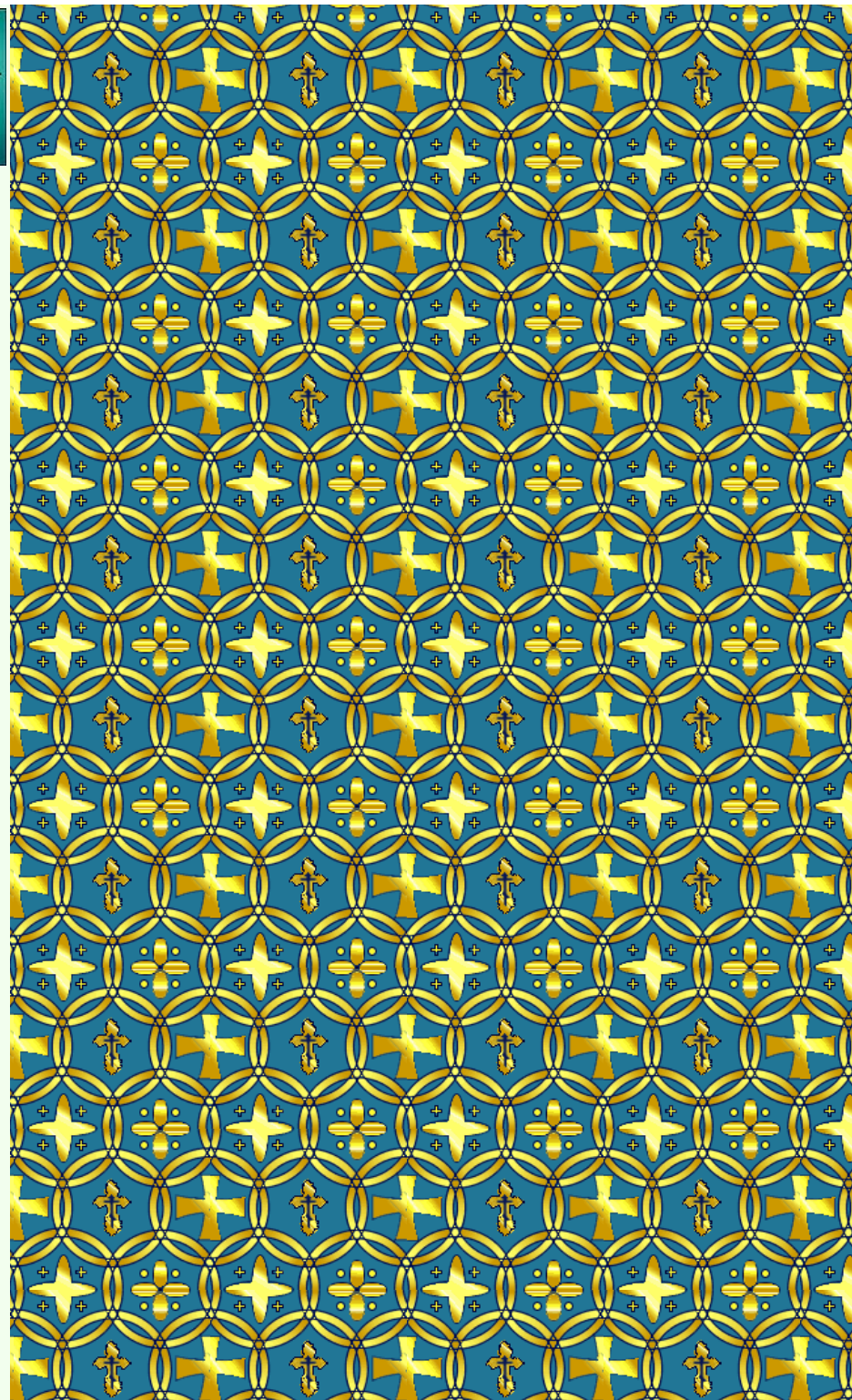
Introduction

We are going to show how the concept of matter was related with the infinite, the unbounded and the evil in Plotinus and how appeared in the dialogue *Against Manicheans* of John Damascenus to have the meaning of *privatio boni*. Of course there is a distance of time between these two writers, but it will be useful to compare the 3rd (Plotinus) and the 8th (Damascenus) centuries A.D. At the 3rd century Plotinus continues the classic Greek idea that anything good and positive in this world has a limit (*peras*). So that the matter, if expresses the unboundedness and the lack of limitation it must be evil (Of course Plotinus was the first inside the history of Greek philosophy who attributes the adjective *infinite* to God). Plotinus represents a short of bridge between Greek philosophy and Christianity; but it is with J. Damascenus that the neoplatonic idea of matter looses its independency and becomes a non being and a privation of good. In Plotinus this idea was not at all clear. For that, Plotinus continues to have the classic Greek view about matter as infinite parallelly with the later Christian doctrine, which in J. Damascenus finds its perfection: matter as evil has not ontological independency.

1. Interpretation of matter in Plotinus: unbounded, infinite, evil

As matter the Unbounded is for Plotinus simply *that which is without limit (peras)*-the limiting principle which is form. It is the absolute formlessness which form informs and limits. The remark of Plotinus that matter is *a last and lowest form (eidos ti eskhaston)*,^[1] is not common in the *Enneads*, because the view of matter as non being and completely formlessness dominates. Nevertheless this remark is the seed for the later Christian doctrine of Cappadocian Fathers, and has as a consequence the idea that matter has not independency.^[2]

It should be noted that unboundedness as such was not for Plotinus necessarily evil,^[3] because the same philosopher attributes the adjective unbounded to the matter as well as to the Good or One. On the other hand, matter was considered as the primarily evil, which exists as idea before of that in which it is (in the soul or elsewhere).^[4] Although evil was related with matter, there is not in Plotinus any daemonic power in it. In the treatise I.8 (*On the Nature and Origin to Evil*) matter is formless and non being. It is also without quality, and absolute privation of all qualities. But in I.8.12.1-7 Plotinus sustains that matter is not absolute privation because it is potentially good. Finally he refuses to give an objective hypostasis to evil although this is identified with matter. The Good, One or God constitutes the only real power in the world and through the emanation of His activity makes this world to be in operation. But this emanating activity resembles a light from a luminary, which radiates life, being and energy everywhere. Therefore matter in plotinian system takes its suitable place in the ultimate and darkest region, inside this luminous radiation of Goodness.



2. Damascenus on the subject of evil and non being of matter

At first we must put emphasis on the contrary interpretation of matter between Plotinus and the patristic view. Plotinus considers matter as a formless and without limitation entity, comparing it with the receptacle of Platonic *Timaeus*. The Orthodox interpretation of matter by Gregory of Nyssa and Saint Maximus the Confessor was referred to a creating fact or a contribution of rational qualities. [5] God is He who has the need of matter and with His personal creative activity forms it. But it is in the conception of matter by Damascenus and all Byzantine Philosophy where we should to stay: matter is not an absolute evil. The reality or substance of evil matter is questioned. Evil has no independent existence, either it is in matter, or in the intelligible world. Plotinus didn't accept this idea because for him evil exists only in the world of senses, that is, the realm of Here. Of course also Plotinus referred to the evil as a privation of Good and he doesn't give always to it an absolute meaning. But he didn't make the last step, which was accomplished by Christianity. The dogmatic culmination of Damascenus on the problem of evil appeared in the dialogue *Against Manicheans*; in this book he claims that matter is possible to turn towards good through the memory of God. Even the irrational matter, which hasn't intelligence, is included inside the divine toleration. [6]

3. Plotinus's hypostasis: form and matter

Matter is found in the intelligible world as well as in the sense-world, on the levels of both Intellect (*Nous*) and Soul. The lower hypostasis is timelessly produced by the higher as an informed, unbounded and indefinite potentiality and timelessly turns back to it in contemplation and so, on Aristotle's psychological principle *becomes what it thinks* and is informed and filled with definite content. [7] The ultimate of this intelligible and infinite (*apeiron*) power is attributed to the One.

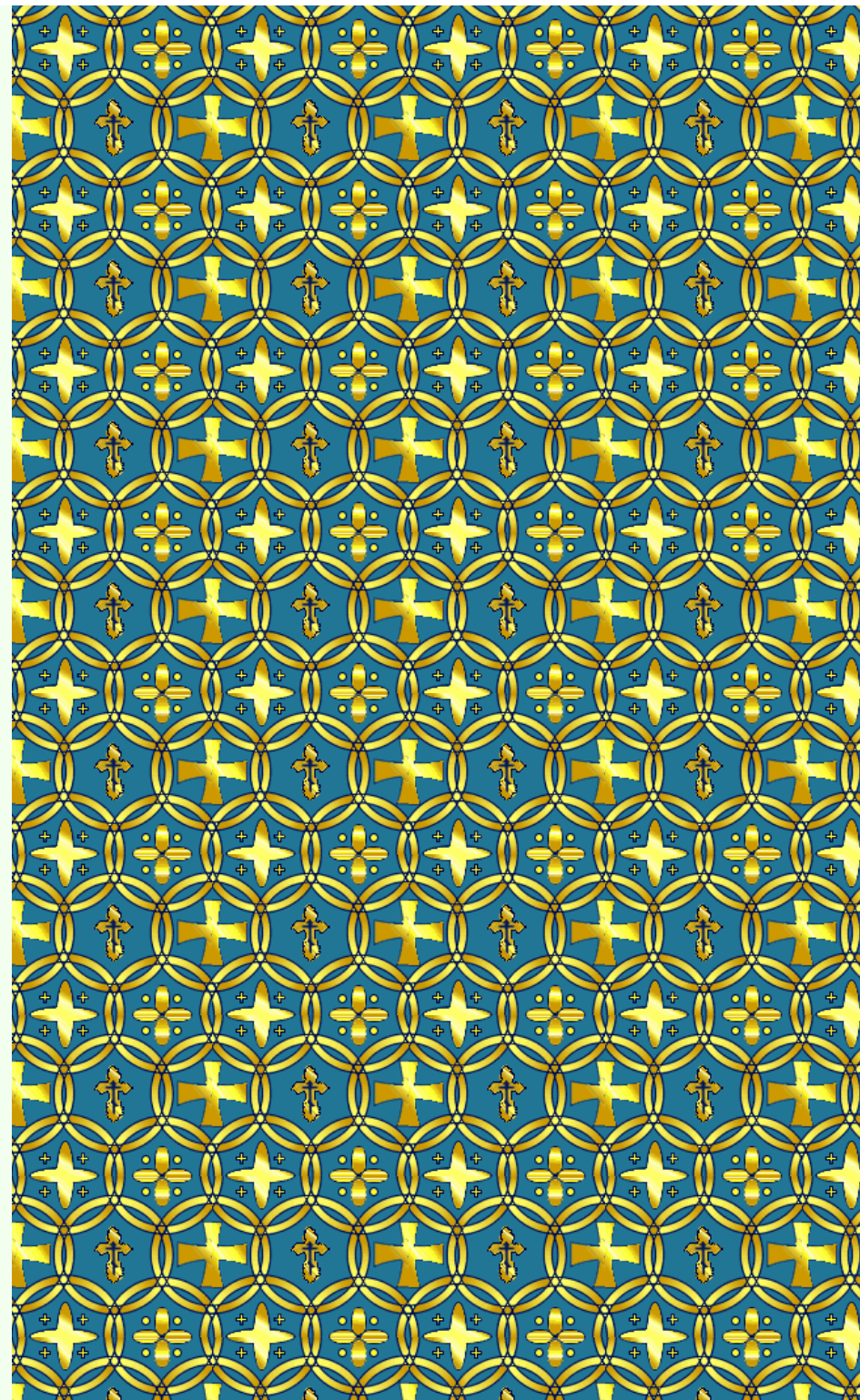
Plotinus never thinks of the unbounded as matter as a sort of static neutral material, but always as tendency, a movement either towards or away from form, either a greater unification -to be informed for Plotinus always means to be unified, to participate according to a thing's capacity and degree of being in the One- or to indefinitely increasing multiplicity; and on the direction of that tendency its good or evil depends.

The idea of the unbounded as the principle of evil in the material world is one which has been unhesitatingly rejected by most Christians thinkers; on the other hand the Aristotelian doctrine of matter (*hylē*) in the form which it takes in Plotinus's thought, about the unbounded as material principle in the intelligible, would has always held an important place in Christian thinking. St. Augustine expounds it in Book XII of the *Confessions*. St. J. Damascenus rejects also the Manicheanistic idea of an evil matter and he accepts the Biblical word that all the creation of God is very good and beautiful. (*Kai eiden ho Theos panta, hosa epoiēse, kai idou kala lian*). [8]

We have already said that for the Christian Orthodoxy material beings were produced by a meeting of purely spiritual and intelligible qualities and that there was no material substratum apart from these qualities. [9] So that after Plotinus, a way of looking at the world as a structure of created forms rather than of form and matter seems to follow. Therefore we must keep what seems valuable in Plotinus's doctrine of matter; the idea that the derived intelligible receives its whole existence in submitting itself as 'matter' to its source as 'form'. This is the idea that Christianity kept, trying to make a harmony between *Genesis* and *Timaeus*, of Revelation and of pagan philosophy. [10]

4. The free will of man between good and evil and the primordial alteration

The whole world was created at first as good and then changed towards evil. Consequently evil wasn't the same at first, as it is now, but it should be



considered as a later addition and privation. Damascenus is opposed, on the one hand, to the Manicheans who were accepting the existence of evil as granted, and indirectly, on the other hand, to the Gnostics, who were the believers of an evil and vengeful Creator, who created an evil world as a bad joke for the mankind.^[1]

According to the Orthodox Christian thought, badness or sin is the absence of good gifts, which God has offered to our rational nature. This absence or loss of divine goods is the consequence of the free will of man and the primordial alteration. Man has already the good inside him and is he who chooses the bad or the good selection. This existential freedom is based on the belief that evil 'doesn't exist'. So if we were considering evil as a reality, this also would be inside the man and he could not act differently, but he would be a slave of it. Therefore evil is identified with non being and remoteness from God. It is also the continual alteration which permits the introduction of the evil in the world. Plotinus would say that the remoteness from God and the turning towards matter is the evil. It is the same idea that Damascenus sustains, but on the base of human freedom and world's alteration. Any action which is according to the law of God is never bad or evil. The meaning of this word is that our will is in harmony with the will of God.^[2]

Conclusion

Matter is the privation of good: this is the reason that the unboundedness of matter cannot be absolute, but only relative. The infinite according to Plotinus is also an attribute -but this time absolute- to God, Good or One. The ancient terror of infinite and unbounded (Plato and Aristotle) changed in Plotinus. The term infinite became an attribute, with negative concept to matter and an attribute with positive meaning to God. However, we believe that matter was considered as unbounded and infinite, because wasn't easy to be explained completely. Plotinus referred to God's infinity and he reduces the other pole, matter, to mere non being. It is plausible then, that the ultimate hypostasis in the hierarchy of Plotinian system, matter, is evil and privation. We also should make a remark about the two roles of matter in Plotinian system- which doesn't exist in Christianity: matter is the unbounded, the infinite, the non being, but it cannot be an absolute hypostasis. Only in Christianity and especially in John Damascenus this idea takes a permanency and becomes a standard doctrine of the Church. The only reality in the world is God and Goodness. Everywhere we find a tension towards the evil this is a tension towards the matter. But this tension-although man is free- cannot earn the reality. Evil hasn't real substance: it is a lie, an illusion. God is the real love, goodness and existence. Although man is free, because of its capacity to change continually, there is a destination to the good alteration not only for man, but for the whole world. Even devil will be good in the Second Coming. The entire world is good and the entire world will be saved at the fullness of time.

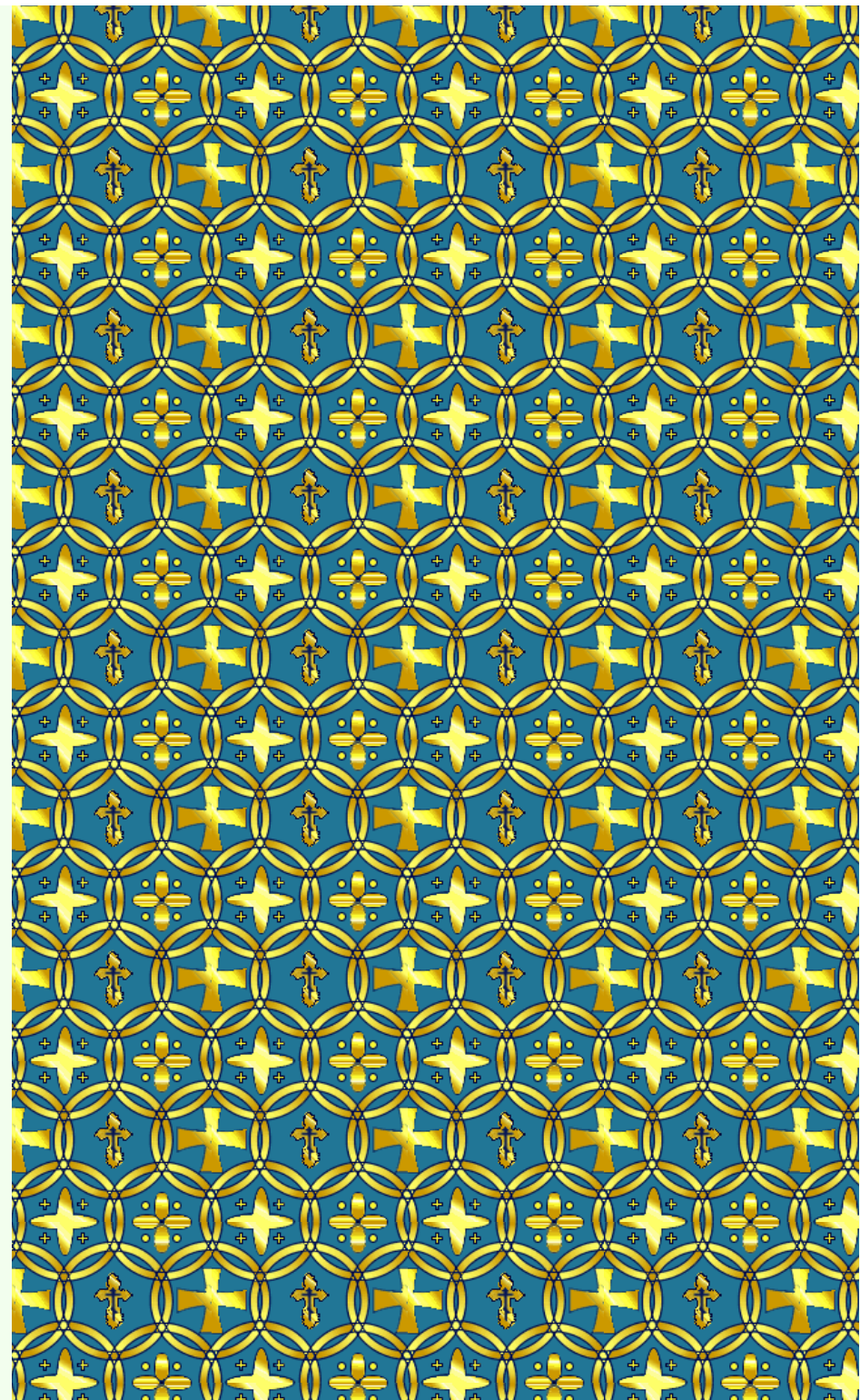
Notes:

[1] Plotinus, *Enneads* V.8.7 (All the references of Enneads are from: Plotinus, *Enneads*, with an English translation by A.H. Armstrong, The Loeb Classical Library, Vol. I-VII, London, 1988)

[2] A.H. Armstrong, "Plotinus's Doctrine of the Infinite and Christian Thought," *The Downside Review* 73 (No. 231) Bath, 1954/5,47-58

[3] *Enneads* II.4.3

[4] A.H.Armstrong referred to a well known contradiction inside the Plotinian system (*The Architecture of Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus*, A. M. Hakkert, Amsterdam, 1967, 86) which seems to ignore W.R.Inge (*The Philosophy of Plotinus*, 2 vol., London, 1948, 131-3). The problem of the contradiction between matter as evil and matter as a kind of form seems to



appear because of the narrow connection between ethics and ontology in the philosophy of Plotinus.

[5] C. Yannaras, *Elements of Faith*. Transl. by T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1991, chapt.6 and J. Damascenus, *Against Manicheans Dialogue*, Text-Translation-Introduction-Comments by N. Matsoukas, Ed. Pournara, Thessalonica, 1998, 25 (In Modern Greek)

[6] J. Damascenus, *Against Manicheans*, ibid. 169-163 and note 69

[7] A.H. Armstrong, "Plotinus Doctrine...", *op.cit.* 49 and note 6

[8] *Genesis* 1, 31 and Damascenus, *Against Manicheans*, *op.cit.* 275

[9] St. Basil, *In Hexaemeron* I, 21A-21B, St. Gregory, *De hom. Opificio* 213C in A. H. Armstrong, *op.cit.* 55 and note 27

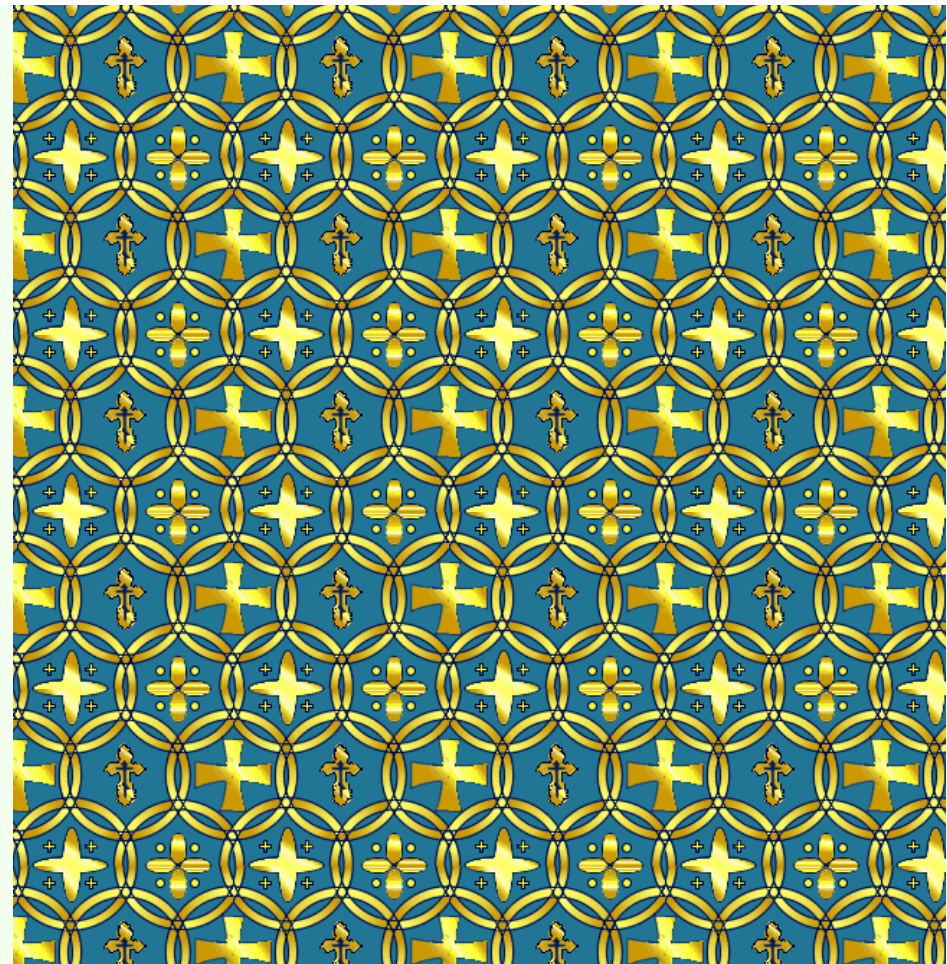
[10] L. Benakis, "Nicephoros Choumnos, Über die Materie und die Ideen. Einleitung, Kritische Edition und Neugriechische Übersetzung," *PHILOSOPHIA*3, 1973, 339-381 and L.Benakis, "Nikephoros Choumnos (1250-1327). Über die seele Gegen Plotin," in *Neoplatonism et Philosophie Medievale. Actes de Colloque International de Corfou (6-8.10.1995) organisé par la Societe Internationale pour L' Etude de la Philosophie Medievale*, edites par L.G. Benakis, Turnhout, Brepols, 1997, 319-326.

[11] Plotinus, *Enneads* II.9 (*Against the Gnostics*)

[12] N. Matsoukas, *The problem of evil. Treatise on patristic Theology*. Ed. Pournara, Thessalonica, 1992 (In Modern Greek)

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