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## The Image of God's Being Expressed through "Essentia" in Creation and in Man

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### Abstract

The study explores some aspects of the doctrine about the image of God in Creation and in Man, as it was transmitted in the Greek philosophical tradition and assumed, also, implicitly but not clearly explicitly, in the biblical and patristic one. It refers especially at the expression "Image of God's Being" detailing the way how the primordial "essentia" or elements of creation are structuring the world or cosmos as image of God "painted" or "sculpted" with these "essentia" as some quaternary structures or images revealed also in the first triad of the angelic celestial beings of Cherubim, Serafim and Thrones. The original contribution of this study is this bringing to attention of this ancient philosophical doctrine about God's ideas and "essentia" present in Creation and Man, the theological and cosmological development and conclusions resulting from it, and its logical and symbolical confirmation by the patristic doctrine of the cherubic throne in cosmos and in man.

### Keywords

Image of God, essentia, Creation, likeness with God, four elements, archai

## I. The Image of God's Being in Bible

In the Book of the Wisdom of Solomon 2, 23 it is revealed that "God created man incorruptible and made him **in the image of His being**". The Romanian translation is "Dumnezeu a zidit pe om spre nesticăciune şi l-a

facut după chipul ființei Sale”, and in Romanian, the expression is quite common being used also in the translation of Saint Basil Holy Liturgy, where, in a cosmological context, referring to the ages’ accomplishment, Jesus Christ the Son of God equal with his Father is presented as: “*the Radiance of His glory and the Image of His hypostasis*, upholding all things by the word of His power”<sup>1</sup>. In other place in the same Liturgy there is reference to Jesus Christ as *the image of the goodness of Father* which can and must be identified with The One from neoplatonism, id est with the Being which must be compulsory good, and thus, the expression “*the image of Your goodness, the seal of Your true likeness*” is referring to the Father as image of the Good Being of God”<sup>2</sup>.

The English translations of Wisdom of Solomon, Ch. 2, 23 in Bible differ from version to version. Thus, the New American Bible, says indeed that “God formed man to be imperishable; **the image of his own nature** he made him”<sup>3</sup>. The Hebrew original text says that *Ki adonai bara et ha’adam lehachayoto chayyei olam. Veya’as oto betzalmo kidmuto*: - “Because God created man to live forever. And he will make him **in his image according to / as his likeness**”, resulting a greater appropriation between “likeness” (betzalmo) and “being” **וְיַעֲשֶׂה אֹתוֹ כְּצֶלְמוֹ יְהוָה וְיַחֲיֶה אֹתוֹ לְעוֹלָם לְעוֹלָם**.<sup>4</sup>

The same verset is translated in Septuagint: 23 ὅτι ὁ Θεὸς ἔκτισε τὸν ἄνθρωπον ἐπ’ ἀφθαρσία καὶ εἰκόνα τῆς ἰδίας ἰδιότητος ἐποίησεν αὐτόν, inspiring some modern translation to interpret εἰκόνα as “His proper specificity”, or as an “image of his own personality created him” – in a

<sup>1</sup> *PRAYERS OF THE LITURGY OF ST. BASIL THE GREAT, APPENDIX VII - LITURGY OF ST. BASIL THE GREAT*, The Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of America, p. 310, [https://roea.orthodoxws.com/files/Parish%20Resources/Liturgy-St-Basil\\_booklet\\_FINAL.pdf](https://roea.orthodoxws.com/files/Parish%20Resources/Liturgy-St-Basil_booklet_FINAL.pdf). *Liturgier*, Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2012, p. 250. Also, other reference to this topic of the image of God in the liturgical text: “When You created man by taking dust from the earth, and honored him with *Your own image*, O God, You set him in a paradise of delight, promising him eternal life and the enjoyment of everlasting blessings in the observance of Your commandments.” *PRAYERS OF THE LITURGY OF ST. BASIL THE GREAT...* p. 310; *Liturgier*, 2012, p. 249, “He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, conforming to the body of our lowliness, that He might transform us in *the image of His glory*”. p. 312

<sup>2</sup> *PRAYERS OF THE LITURGY OF ST. BASIL THE GREAT...*, p. 308, *Liturgier*, p. 248.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/\\_PLJ.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/_PLJ.HTM),

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.sefaria.org/The\\_Wisdom\\_of\\_Solomon.2.23?lang=bi&with=Translations&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/The_Wisdom_of_Solomon.2.23?lang=bi&with=Translations&lang2=en),

contemporaneous translation, but the other English translation put it as "an image of his own eternity"<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand in the verse 24 it is said that through the envy of the evil one death has been introduced as a state of corruptibility and disharmony in the creation which was till then an adornment and an harmony (φθόνῳ δέ διαβόλου θάνατος εισήλθεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον; Wisdom 2, 23-24).

The expression that interests us here, translated in a similar manner in the modern languages, "**the image of being**" (of God), is found in a Christological context in the Epistle to the Hebrews of the Holy Apostle Paul 1, 2-3 where we are told that God "In these last days he spoke to us through the Son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he also made the ages. Who, **being the radiance of glory** and the **image of His being** (ὄν ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ *χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ*) and Who holds all things by the word of His power (τῷ ῥήματι τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ), after having accomplished, by Himself, the cleansing of our sins, sat at the right hand glory, to the highest".

On the other hand, in Colossians 1, 15-20, Christ is presented as "the **image of the invisible God**, the firstborn of all creation..." (*εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου*, πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως; Vehu tzelem ha'elhim hanne'lam uvechor kol-nivra)<sup>6</sup>. The context in Colossians 1, 15 is that

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ellopos.net/elpenor/greek-texts/septuagint/chapter.asp?book=29&page=2>

<sup>6</sup> <http://sarshalom.us/resources/scripture/asv/html/colossians.html>

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| <p>טו והוא צלם האלהים הנעלם ובכור כל-נברא:</p>   | <p>15</p> | <p>who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;</p>   |
| <p>טז כי-בו נברא כל אשר בשמים ואשר בארץ כל הנראה וכל אשר-איננו נראה הן פסאות וממשלות הן שררות ורשויות הכל נברא על-ידו ולמענהו:</p> | <p>16</p> | <p>for in him were all things created, in the heavens and upon the earth, things visible and things invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things have been created through him, and unto him;</p> |
| <p>יז והוא לפני הכל והכל קים בו:</p>   | <p>17</p> | <p>and he is before all things, and in him all things consist.</p>   |
| <p>יח והוא ראש גוף העדה אשר הוא ראשית ובכור מעם המתים למען יהיה הראשון בכל:</p>  | <p>18</p> | <p>And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.</p>  |

of creation of all the hierarchic angelic entities, saint Paul enumerating four of them, commencing with the Thrones which are depicted as some fourfold structured entities, and we will see that this enumeration has a deep symbolical meaning throughout the entirely philosophical and Christian tradition. The context is that of the creation, Christ, as “the **image of the invisible God**” being presented as “the firstborn of all creation...” (πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως), containing in Him all the essentia and potentialities which will structure the creation as hierarchy, harmony and cosmos as an act of expressing in world the hidden and superessential being of God. And although the context is exactly referring to the spiritual creation of the celestial hierarchy, the apostle says that, also, “all things (that means all the created material things) have been created through him, and unto him”, opening to us the perspective to understand Christ as the “image of God” not only for the celestial hierarchy, but also for the created material cosmos which exists through him because “in him all things consist”. (Col. 1, 17)

In Christ are existing the existential essentia for the entirely creation, and here Saint Paul ascribes to Jesus Christ what Aristotle thought about the Being and its *Ideas* or *eidos*, which, transmitted and enriched through

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י 19 כִּי-יָרְכֵן הַיְהוָה הַרְצוֹן לְשִׂכְנוֹ בּוֹ אֶת-כָּל הַמְּלוֹא:

19 For it was the good pleasure of the Father that in him should all the fulness dwell;

כ 20 וְלִרְצוֹן לְעַצְמוֹ אֶת-הַכֹּל עַל-יְדוֹ בְּעֲשׂוֹתוֹ שְׁלוֹם בְּדַם-צְלוֹבוֹ עַל-יְדוֹ הוּא אֲשֶׁר בְּאֶרֶץ הוּא אֲשֶׁר בְּשָׁמַיִם:

20 and through him to reconcile all things unto himself, having made peace through the blood of his cross; through him, I say, whether things upon the earth, or things in the heavens.

<sup>15</sup> ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου, πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως, 16 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, τὰ ὄρατά καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα, εἴτε θρόνοι εἴτε κυριότητες εἴτε ἀρχαὶ εἴτε ἐξουσίαι· τὰ πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἔκτισται, 17 καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν. 18 καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος, τῆς ἐκκλησίας· ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή, πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν, ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων, 19 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι 20 καὶ δι’ αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν, εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ, [δι’ αὐτοῦ] εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

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the philosophical approach of the Dionysian Corpus to the Church, will serve as foundation for the dogmatic, mystical and scholastic thinking of the Church, especially in the West: "Therefore, on the one hand, we have the Being—existence itself (to on he on), on the other hand, the essence (eidos), as the first determination of the Being in a determined universality. Aristotle names this *essentia* with the expression *to ti esti*, «that which is» and *to ti hen einai*, «that which was to be». The scholastics, following him, deriving it from the Verb *esse*, translated it by *quod quid erat esse*, a phrase with the help of which they defined the existential character of the essence: «that by which something can be this», (*hoc per quod aliquid habet esse quid*) or, more explicitly: «It is called essence, because through it and in it a thing has its existence» (*Essentia dicitur, secundum quod per eam et in ea res habet esse*)<sup>7</sup>.

Thus, "the image of the invisible – Being of – God" refers to the pro-niator and sustaining and all-holding of the creation Ideas or *essentia* existing in the Being or *ousia* of God, and expressed, also, in Christ the eternal Logos and Son, in the man, but also expressed in the creation as the "image of God". Also the existential Ideas from the image of God's Being are expressed, as we have seen, as the "radiance of glory" (*ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης*) in the Son, a similar expression describing Christ in 2 Corinthians 4, 4, where Saint Paul relates the image of God to the Christ preached in world saying that "The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who **is the image of God**". In the context of the above quotes we can deduce that not only Christ is the image of God, but also "the glory of Christ" is the *eikon tou Theou*. The "gospel's light of the glory of Christ" implies an irradiation, a sharing to the world of the glory or uncreated energies belonging to the Person of Christ. It is the personal light of Christ that the preaching or annunciation of the glory of Christ spreads. And this fact discovers the image of God in the light and wisdom of God spread

<sup>7</sup> Anton DUMITRIU, *Philosophia Mirabilis, încercare asupra unei dimensiuni necunoscută a filosofiei grecești*. Editura Enciclopedică Română București, 1974, p. 97, resumming THOMAS DE AQUINO, *De Ente et Essentia*, cap. 1. and ARISTOTEL, *Metaphysica*, VII, 4, 1030 a.

through the four Gospels of the biblical canon, as it is largely detailed by Angela Russell Christman, in her work<sup>8</sup>.

From these 3 biblical verses from above results that both man and the Son of God or the Son of Man (Jn 6, 27)<sup>9</sup> - the Savior Jesus Christ are defined as the image of God's being (χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ), but unlike man who has this image by making or creation (εἰκόνα τῆς ἰδίας ιδιότητος ἐποίησεν αὐτόν), the Son of God is not having but is being this very image of the being and also is the "radiance of the glory" (ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης) of this being of God (ὄν ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ).

Although both the term for "image" and for "being" or "nature" are different in these verses due to the distanced epochs of these two biblical books, their significance coincides because both are referring to the same God whose images are the man and the Son of God. The term εἰκόνα is usual in OT and NT writings and χαρακτήρ is introduced as equivalent to it in the NT writings for expressing the concept of image, appearance and manifestation at surface of something which is hidden. That means the image of God is the brilliance of the appearance or manifestation of the glory and character/image of what is/sit underneath – of what God is in His hiddenness. And this definition is suitable and compatible with the terms used for expressing the Being of God (τῆς ὑποστάσεως, τῆς ἰδίας ιδιότητος).

We are interested here more about ontological aspect, the Greek and Hebrew terms for "being" of God as it is translated in the modern English in the above biblical verses, τῆς ἰδίας ιδιότητος, and τῆς ὑποστάσεως, betzalmo, referring to what is proper and is the real sub-stance or hypostasis for God, the Father of Jesus Christ and the Creator of cosmos and man as recapitulation of it. But what is constituting and expressing the image (εἰκόνα, χαρακτήρ) of this Being was theorized in different ways by

<sup>8</sup> Angela RUSSELL CHRISTMAN, "What Did Ezekiel See?". *Christian Exegesis of Ezekiel's Vision of the Chariot from Irenaeus to Gregory the Great*, coll. *Bible in Ancient Christianity*, Brill, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> "Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which **the Son of Man** will give to you, for on Him God the Father **has sealed**".

the ancient philosophical and Christian patristic tradition, and is inviting us to a further analysis of the problem.

## II. The Being of God and the meaning of "essentia" in ancient Greek and scholastic medieval philosophical tradition

Anyway, the expression "image of Being of God", invite us to approach how God is expressing His Being, how God as the only real Being is expressing Himself, and in this respect, preserving the same revelational and biblical perspective, we can see that God has manifested Himself in the beginning (*arche*) through the primordial elements of the creation as through some means expressing outwardly his superessential Being. The biblical verse "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth", offers us the word *bereshit* or *arche*, and the perspective of an integral act of creation in which the principal two primordial elements are created "in the beginning", in the "arche". For the ancient philosophy the concept of *arche* had a large and complex meaning: "«beginning, origin, primordial element, birth, firstborn, peak, cause, basis, principle, element, leadership, command», and to the plural form, «archai» principles are added, along with the meaning of «initial truths», and the meanings of «**initial, primordial, original elements**», and also in all these meanings the word «cause» is also used, because all causes are principles"<sup>10</sup>. The same can be said about *bereshit*, translated as *obârşie* in Romanian and as *origin* in English. And, as Anton Dumitriu has resumed,

“... Whichever of these meanings (of the *arche*) we consider, it is obvious that it refers to a deeper substratum, to which these *archai* belong. This substratum, bearing all that exists, both to the individuals and to the principles (*archai*), is the Being. Scrutinizing reality in its ultimate depth, the Greek thinkers found its safest and simplest substrate, which is, in its nature, «existence as existence» (to on he on), existence itself.. «indeterminate existence», prior to the appearance of its first

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. ARISTOTEL, *Metaphysica*, V (Delta). 1, 1013 a.

logical determinations, i.e. the categories ... or, as the scholastics will say translating the Aristotelian expression quoted above, *ens in quantum ens*”<sup>11</sup>.

To understand in the real perspective the affirmation from above, we must have in mind the first determination of Being conceived by Aristotle, named with the term *eidos* translated through *image* in the philosophical and patristic tradition, and as *essentia* in the scholastic one, because this first determination is, as the ancient wisdom affirms, the real and the most profound substratum of Being which expresses the Being and could be seen or understood by man in his exercise of contemplation and philosophy, beyond these *eidos* and/or *essentia* existing only the ineffable Being impossible to contemplate by rational souls and spirits. This perspective is resumed by Anton Dumitriu saying that the great thinkers of Athens—Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—did not aim to define concepts through abstract definitions, but their focus was on understanding the complete and total Forms that embody the essence of things, the science of the universal being compulsory only a science of Being in its essential units, a science of beginnings, and a theory. Also, he emphasizes that the term “*eidos*” translated as “essence”, has a clear connection to “*to katholou*”, linking it to theoretical knowledge, expressing the direct knowledge through which one “sees” Being; and that the archaic form of “*eidos*” also included a digamma—a letter that later disappeared—resulting in the reading [veidos], whose etymon shares roots with the Sanskrit word “*vidyā*”, meaning “science” or “to see”, which in turn gave rise to the Latin verb “*video*” or “*videre*”, meaning “to see”, and thus, the essence, as well as the universal, is perceived directly, akin to an immediate and clear vision<sup>12</sup>.

Thus, to see the Being of God is possible only as a theory or as a science of the beginning or of the arche/bereshit in which God is discovering His essential works as an image possible to be seen or understood only through an act of contemplation, of Theoria. For Parmenide, the only way to reach the truth is the way of Being, because to think means to enter

<sup>11</sup> Anton DUMITRIU, *Philosophia Mirabilis...*, pp. 68, 89.

<sup>12</sup> Anton DUMITRIU, *Philosophia Mirabilis...* p. 99.

into Being and “the thinking is not different from Being, because there is nothing but only the Being...”<sup>13</sup>. If God, as Saint Dionisius is telling us, receives names expressing His Ideas or workings or *energeia* of His Being or ousia, then the products of this workings or *energeia* are images of God in creation, or the Image of God in creation as an ensemble of His main or primordial Ideas or *essentia*. And these Ideas are not some inert and dead stuff, but full of *energeia*, of dynamis, of power of life animating the Creation, these Ideas transforming ontologically the contemplator of them because “in the domain of the immaterial there is identity between the one who think and the object which is thought”<sup>14</sup>. This aspect was emphasized by Aristotle when he named the categories “universal primes” (*tâ koina prota*)<sup>15</sup> and “ways of existence” (*schemata tou ontos*) or “categories of existence” (*kategoriai tou ontos*)<sup>16</sup>. This is why Anton Dumitriu concludes that the meanings of the term *to schema* “attitude, behavior, conformation, appearance, dignity, brilliance”, permit us to translate *to schema* by “the modes under which appears the Being” or, more briefly “the modalities, **the radiances of the «Being»**”<sup>17</sup>. Thus, this is why, also, Saint Paul refers “radiance of the glory” (*ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης*) of God to the “image of God”, as we have seen above, because to see the someone’s image or the image of God means to grasp his *eidos* or *essentia*.

In his work *De Cherubim*, Philon from Alexandria is saying that the Two Cherubim from the Temple Sanctuary are the visible image of the unseen God, symbolizing the Two Principal Ideas of the platonic God – The Good and the Truth, in order to facilitate a representation of God for the chosen people, and in this perspective we can assume that, also, God the Father, the original Arche, manifests Himself in the scenario of the Creation as Spirit and as Logos as His principal immaterial *essentia*

<sup>13</sup> PARMENIDE in *Frangments* 8, apud Anton DUMITRIU, *Philosophia Mirabilis...*, p. 94,

<sup>14</sup> ARISTOTEL, *De anima*, III, 4, 430a, apud Anton DUMITRIU, *Philosophia Mirabilis...*, p. 95.

<sup>15</sup> ARISTOTEL, *Analitecele secunde* II, 13, 96b; *Metaphys*, VII, 9, 1034b. apud Anton DUMITRIU, *Philosophia Mirabilis...*, p. 101

<sup>16</sup> ARISTOTEL, *Physica*, III, 1, 200b; *Metaphys*, IV, 28, 1024b. apud Anton DUMITRIU, *Philosophia Mirabilis...*, p. 101

<sup>17</sup> Anton DUMITRIU, *Philosophia Mirabilis...*, p. 101.

implied in world creation and providence over the secondary material *essentia* or elements<sup>18</sup>.

But on the level of the created material world there are these other secondary material *essentia* or elements which are perceived as expressing the image of the unseen God, and all these Ideas or *essentia* has become, in the (pre)history of the humankind, candidates to the title and honour of god, as the presocratic philosophy present us, and the animistic religious tradition confirm it. It is important to mention and resume their history in philosophy, because, as we will see, these *essentia* could be identified in the revealed story of creation as the principal Ideas or elements imaging God.

Thus, Thales identifies this principle with the “water” indispensable to life, but we cannot know from the texts that have come down to us whether Thales’ water - the principle of life - is identical to the ordinary water known to us. Anaximander places at the origin of the world as the “primordial principle” an element he called *apeiron*, the “infinite” without defining whether it was air, water or something else<sup>19</sup>. It seems that he was the one who first used the expression *arche*<sup>20</sup>.

Anaximene, the student of Anaximander, called the unique physical substratum “air” (*mian ipokeimenon physin*), but this was not the ordinary air known to us, but expresses its nature of “breath”, hence the name *pneuma*, which was given to it.

<sup>18</sup> “It told me that in the one living and true God there were two supreme and primary powers--goodness and authority; and that by his goodness he had created everything, and by his authority he governed all that he had created; (28) and that the third thing which was between the two, and had the effect of bringing them together was reason, for that it was owing to reason that God was both a ruler and good” (*The Cherubim* IX 27, 28) Yonge’s title, *A Treatise on the Cherubim; and On the Flaming Sword; and On the First-Born Child of Man, Cain*. <https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/yonge/book5.html>. Cohn L., 1896, *Philonis Alexandrini opera quae supersunt*, vol. 1, Reimer, Berlin, [repr. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1962: 176; transl. C.D. Yonge, *The works of Philo: Complete and unabridged*, New Updated, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, 1993, p. 120].

<sup>19</sup> DIOGENES LAERTIUS, *Despre viețile și doctrinele filozofilor*, București, Ed. Academiei, 1965, VI, 1.

<sup>20</sup> SIMPLICIUS, *Commentaria in octo Aristotelis physicae auscultationes libros* (D, 322, 151). Also ARISTOTLE, in: *De generatione et corruptione* (I, 6, 322 b).

For the Pythagoreans, the elements that form the ultimate foundation of the world are “numbers” and the “proportions” expressed by them. Aristotle says that “the so-called Pythagoreans, who were the first to deal with mathematics ..., believed themselves justified in considering its **numbers as the principles of the whole Being**”. Xenophanes of Colophon puts as the unique principle the “cosmos”, defined by him by the formula: “One and All” (En kai pasan) equated by Aristotle with form and matter whose nature Xenophon did not strive to elucidate and for this reason his conception seems to him “too simplistic”<sup>21</sup>.

Among the Eleatics, for Anaxagoras of Clazomenae the principle or distinct element that made the world a rational order — Kosmos — was “**reason, intelligence**”, defined in Greek philosophy under the name of **mind or nous**. Heraclitus identifies this organized and rational “Cosmos” with “the eternal living **fire** that is and will always be”.

Summarizing these ancient conceptions, Empedocles of Agrigentum accepts **four primordial elements**, “water”, “fire”, “earth” and “air” from whose continuous fusion all things in the world derive. Inspiring modern materialism, Democritus and after him, Epicurus, identify “atoms” as the main elements, Plato places the principles of the world in “ideas” and Aristotle, in “form” and “matter”; the Stoics consider the “active” (poioun - the doer), the “passive” (pashon - the sufferer) and the “breath” (Pneuma) as the first principles and, finally, the last great philosopher, Plotinus, defines the “One” as the principle that unfolds in the Intellect and the Soul of the world. The history and philosophy of religions gives us testimonies of how these principles were deified in the simplistic understanding of the world by the ancients<sup>22</sup>.

This ancient philosophical tradition has been inherited in the Christian Church principally via Dionysius Areopagite, although, also, Saint Augustin inaugurated this reception of the platonic theology and ontology to western branch of Christianity, determining great theologians and mystics as Anselm, Bonaventura and Toma d’Aquino to identify these Ideas with God, whereas Saint Maxim the Confessor subordinates them

<sup>21</sup> ARISTOTEL, *Metaphysica.*, I (A), 5, 985 a, 986 a, 987 a.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Anton DUMITRIU, *Philosophia Mirabilis...* p. 70-71.

to God<sup>23</sup>. All the ancient and medieval philosophical and mystical thinking of the Christian world was focused on the elucidation of these rapports between the Being of God which is a Superbeing on the one hand, and the principal Ideas and *essentia* and the causes and the elements derived and contained in this Being, on the other hand; and about the reality of these Ideas in the Being of God and in creation. It is not our scope here to debate and elucidate these subtle rapports, and because the intention of our study is only to reveal the possible content of the “image of the Being of God”, we will mention here some summary on the subject in the medieval scholastic thinking to reveal the appropriation of the four primordial elements to the pure Ideas and substance.

For Scottus Eriugena, one of the first medieval thinkers and receptor of the Dionysian tradition, “God creates Himself when He creates beings”:

“for when it is said that it (i.e. the divine nature) creates itself, nothing else is rightly understood than that it establishes the nature of «things». Seen from this angle, **the divine Ideas are the first self-creation of God**. In them, the divine nature appears as both creator and created. It is created by itself in them, that is, it begins to appear in them through its theophanies...”<sup>24</sup>.

Not only God creates His image through his Ideas, but, for Eriugena every creature is reflecting and imaging Holy Trinity:

“The divine nature creates itself in Ideas... Creation proper is the work of the Father and consists in the production of Ideas in the Word... Therefore, every creature, reproducing in its own way **the image of God**, is defined in a constitutive trinity: the essence, which corresponds to the Father; the active virtue, which corresponds to the Son; the action, which corresponds to the Holy Spirit”<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> Étienne GILSON, *Filozofia în Evul Mediu, De la începuturile patristice până la sfârșitul secolului al XIV-lea*, tr. Ileana Stănescu, București, ed. Humanitas, 1995, p. 77.

<sup>24</sup> Étienne GILSON, *Filozofia în Evul Mediu*, p. 196.

<sup>25</sup> Étienne GILSON, *Filozofia în Evul Mediu*, p. 197.

There is a continuous mirroring of the Holy Trinity in and through his Ideas and elements in Creation transmitting a trinitarian structure to it, as a shining glimmering the light sparked from divine superbeing. And here, the doctrine of Eriugena continues the ancient Aristotelian understanding of the schema or image of God as **“the radiances of the «Being»** evoked above: “Made up of this multitude of little torches that are things, (Sup hier coel 1,1) creation is ultimately nothing but an illumination destined to show God”. “The subsistence of beings is, like their production, an illumination”. “Such a universe is of the same essence as the Scripture that explains it and that it explains. Both are revelations...”. “Created from nothingness, that is, from the nothingness of their own existence, things are also created from this Nothingness which is the superbeing, that is, God. To say that God is the very reality of things – est enim omnium essentia – means: «to say that each thing is nothing but the divine gift of its own being...”<sup>26</sup>. This is the sense in which Eriugena understands Dionysius’ formula “the being of all things is the divine superbeing”<sup>27</sup>.

The material things are understood as the gifts of God’s Being having their roots and origin as some sort of informational plans existing everlastingly in the mind of God, and Eriugena explains the complex manifestation of multiple forms of matter as constituted from a “coagulation” of these Ideas or intelligible causes<sup>28</sup>.

A similar understanding of the relationship between creation and Ideas of God and matter is found at Gilbertus Porretanus (1076-1154). He considers that

“at the origin of sensible substances are what the Greeks call Ideas, and the Latins call forms. These Ideas are not simple

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<sup>26</sup> Étienne GILSON, *Filozofia în Evul Mediu*, p. 198.

<sup>27</sup> Étienne GILSON, *Filozofia în Evul Mediu*, p. 199.

<sup>28</sup> “What we find first in a body is substance, but its substance is nothing else than its intelligible cause, which subsists eternally in God. Conceived as being in God himself, it takes the name of essence, considered as realized in a body, receives the name of form and gives a nature... Matter is composed of coagulated intelligibles. This conception of matter explains why the creation of the world is confused with that of all intelligible essences, that is, ultimately, with that of their Ideas in God”. Étienne GILSON, *Filozofia în Evul Mediu*, p. 201

«subsistencies», but substances. They are even pure substances (*substantiae sinceræ*), in the sense that they subsist outside matter and without mixing with it. The **main pure substances are four in number**: *fire, air, water, earth*. It is not at all a question here of the sensible elements that we call so, but of the ideal models of these elements. That is why they are called Ideas. Taken in themselves, they are simple. In order to explain the production of things, we must take into account three terms: **primordial matter** and the **two primordial forms** which are the *ousia* (essence, substance, being) of the Creator and the Ideas of sensible things. By saying «forms», we do not mean that God himself in-forms matter. Nor that the Ideas do so, for these never descend into matter. The forms proper, which are united with the matter of sensible bodies, are a kind of copies (*exempla*), which are abstracted from the model (*exemplar*) by a kind of deduction which consists in the conformity with the model (*quadam exempli ab exempli suo conformativa deductione venerunt*). *The forms which are in bodies are therefore not Ideas, but images of the pure and eternal substances which are the Ideas*. **Gilbertus** therefore resumes in his own way the distinction between the divine Ideas and the born forms (*nativæ*), which are only copies of the originals”<sup>29</sup>.

Thus, the creation of the material things plasticizes some sort of forms realizing the images of eternal Ideas of God which at their turn constitutes the image of the unseen or superessential Being of God.

Another medieval author, Theodoric of Chartres (b. around 1100 – d. around 1155), in his attempt to “reconcile *littera*, that is, the Bible with *physica*, in other words with the Commentary of Chalcidius on the *Timaeus*”, states that “In the beginning God created heaven and earth” raises two problems: that of the causes of the universe and that of the order of the days of creation. **The causes are four in number**: the efficient cause, that is, God; the formal cause, that is, the Wisdom of God, which

<sup>29</sup> Étienne GILSON, *Filozofia în Evul Mediu*, p. 246.

determines the form of the future work; the final cause, which is the divine benevolence (*benignitas*); finally, **the material cause, which consists of the four elements**. These elements (*earth, water, air, fire*) are the object of creation proper. It is about them that we are talking, although Scripture calls them heaven and earth. God created them out of nothing, solely through his goodness and mercy, in order to bring to life beings who would share in his beatitude<sup>30</sup>. We see here the same quaternar causal and material structures manifesting and expressing God in His Creation or Cosmos, Theodoric of Chartres describing this quaternar structure in a similar manner as the concentric triadic structure of the neoplatonic Trinity: One, Intellect, Soul:

“As for the order of the days, God made matter from the first moment, each element taking the place that suits its nature and all **four settling in concentric globes: earth, water, air, fire**. The latter, extremely light, naturally tends to move, but, because it envelops everything, it cannot move forward, and then it revolves around itself. Its first complete rotation constitutes the first day, during which fire began to illuminate the air and then, passing through it, the water and the earth. This is the work of the first day...”<sup>31</sup>.

This image of these four elements structured in concentric globes, similar to that of the neoplatonic model of Trinity is unfolded on the first days of creation described in Bible, offering us the perspective to interpret in the same manner the biblical account of creation to see the quaternar structures of God *essentia* and elements of creation.

### **III. God and the uncreated and created “essentia” of Cosmos as expressed in the biblical account of creation**

Due to the fact that both the ancient philosophic and patristic traditions affirm that do not exist being (*ousia*) without his specific work (*energeia*),

<sup>30</sup> Étienne GILSON, *Filozofia în Evul Mediu*, p. 250

<sup>31</sup> Étienne GILSON, *Filozofia în Evul Mediu*, p. 250

we can conclude that in his opera of creation, God expresses His Being through his works. When the Bible says that “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth”, we can and must understand that God mirrors and shines His being in the nothingness of the beginning and thus, creates another triad in the created plane, **the time, the space and the matter** as principia or *essentia* of the world or kosmos in becoming, as images of God in world, kosmos and man. The Hebrew language is codifying in its word *hashamaym*, heavens as composed from water and fire, and thus we already have a pentad **of elements** or *essentia* as images expressing the being of God in his creation (**time, space, water, fire, earth**). We observe that the heavens are already presented as a moving matrix of water in fire, a place of dynamism of this primordial *essentia* or elements created in the beginning by God through his uncreated energies understood as present already in creation.

The second verse of Bible, “**2** And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness *was* upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters”, announces other elements or *essentia* or *universalia* (katholon) which God will create in order that space and matter become cosmos or harmony. The quality of “Without form, and void” (τῷ·ἡὺ·wā·ḥō·ḥū, ἄορατος καὶ ἀκατασκεύαστος) of the primordial earth announces that God will give uncreated *structuring information and energy* to this matter of the primordial earth through the Holy Spirit and Logos, and will make it visible, with forms and with structures. Thus, also there appear **another triad of the real essentia** defined through the hidden, essential works of the Holy Trinity, namely: **the space** rooted in the *arche* or *bereshit* as a unitar domain filled with the oneness of the infinite potentialities, the **structural information** or **wisdom** as **mirrored light** which forms the formless/unseen (τῷ·ἡὺ, ἄορατος) primordial earth (ἡ·ἄ·reš., τὴν γῆν) giving birth to the world of plasticized ideas or forms, etc, and fulfilling, also, the void space (ἄβύς, τῷ·ἡὺ·wm;) as an infinite matrix or *apeiron*, and **the energy** or **the strength (rachia)** which fills and gives content and preparation to the void (wā·ḥō·ḥū, ἀκατασκεύαστος) primordial earth (ἡ·ἄ·reš.) and, also, structures the space as firmament. The “darkness” of the space deepness announces the **Light** as shining or

radiance of the creation given through the divine Logos present as fire from the beginning. Also, if we understand the deep (abyss) as an infinity of an empty space, we can see here announced also the philosophical *apeiron* completed in the second day of creation when the *rachia* or the *firmament* or the *ether* has appeared as an *essentia* which masters and gives forms to the matter in space.

Thus, there is created by the Holy Trinity here, on the one hand, a triad (Arche-time, Heaven-space, earth-matter), which already is a pentad (time, space [water, fire, or heavens], earth-matter) this becoming through the works or *energeia* (space, wisdom, *energeia*) of the Father, Logos and the Holy Spirit an ogdoad of elements or *essentia* or *universalia* as images of God's being in creation (**1. time-** bereshit-morning-evening, eternity, unity **2. primordial earth** or matter-ha'ares, **3. heavens** haš·šā·ma·yim, **4. water** ham·mā·yim, **5. Fire** - šā·ma·yim, **6. light** lā·'ō·wr, **7. The space** - deep, firmament, air, sky lā·rā·qī·a', **8. dry land-** (lay·yab·bā·šāh, ἡ ξηρά). In the first 3 days of creation, God pronounced "let be" the Light, "let be" a firmament and "let appear" the dry land or the earth, as ontological acts manifesting his Being through these *essentia* or elements. 2 Cor 4-6 gives permission to interpret the primordial light from the first day of creation as being indeed Christ, the divine Logos manifested towards creation as wisdom. Christ the divine Logos which pronounced ontologically the Being of God is manifesting Himself as a primordial *essentia* together with the Holy Spirit which is hovering over the primordial waters of creation.

Between the primordial triad (pentad) of *essentia* from the bereshit and the final ogdoad (two tetrad) from the third day, there is a **triad of originar or real essentia (the space, the wisdom, the energy)** or uncreated works of God through which the Holy Trinity fulfills the original *opera creationis* as *opera distinctionis*. Will follow another three days for *opera ornatonis* and the creation of man as recapitulation of entire creation. Thus, God the Holy Trinity creates the kosmos through the mirroring or shining of his Being towards the nothingness of the void abys or space defined as such in His supraessential Unity. Making the primordial earth visible and with forms, evokes the first iconisation or imagination of God in the matter intermediated by the divine ideas and energies. This **triad of originarily**

**or real essentia (the unity of space-time, the wisdom, the energy)** is that which express the image of the unseen God, the ancient Greek philosophy understanding its domain as belonging principally to the ideas and forms structuring the time, matter and space. But we include in this domain of ideas and forms also the space-time and the energies because there is a dynamism and a movement inherent to these ontological ideas shared by Logos to the heavens and matter, and this is why the first triad of the divinely hierarchy is iconizing in spiritual manner the same tetrade of the original material *essentia*, as cherubim, seraphim and thrones. The Wisdom (expressing the Logos of God) as “the beginning of His Ways in creation” (Prov 8, 22) is making tetrade both with the Holy Trinity and with the material trinity of water, fire and matter, thus mediating the image/beauty of God in the world.

Thus, the image of God in creation is understood as a tetrade of elements, the revelational texts of Scripture and Holy Fathers, but also the philosophical tradition repeating obsessively this quaternar structure accompanied by the fifth element – the quintesentia – of the glory of God. In some exegetical approaches this fifth element is assimilated to the aether as the spiritual *plenum* of heaven, or the firmament understood as sustaining energies and structural information. The image of the cherubim in Iezekiel chapter 1 and 10, describes the same quaternar structure over which is resting the likeness of the glory of Son of God. (Ez 1, 28; 10, 18)<sup>32</sup>.

Expressed plastically, we find the same conclusion in a classical cosmological reference to the Cherubim throne as representing synthetically the entire cosmos, with all four elements identified with the four faces of the Cherubim, in Methodius of Olympus’ work, Aglaofon these four faces being being entrusted as leading forces or principalities sustaining and ruling the universe<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> Ez 1, 28: “As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spake”. Ez 10, 18: “Then the glory of the LORD departed from off the threshold of the house, and stood over the cherubims”.

<sup>33</sup> “Expressing the idea that God leads and cares of the world (because life of these creatures is not headed by chance), he says he entrusted this leadership to the four

And the reference to the throne of cherubim found in the prophet Isaiah shows us God alone as ruler of kingdoms, empires, worlds, and even the systems of organization and rule of the Universe, given that the throne of cherubim is another form of expression of the Zodiac as a multiple celestial throne made up of three tetrads of 4 zodiacal signs: "Lord of hosts, God of Israel, who sits between the cherubim, You alone are God of all the kingdoms of the earth. You made heaven and earth" (Is 37, 16).

#### IV. God and the created "essentia" in Man

The same quaternary structure is recurrent in the ancient texts from the philosophical and religious tradition. Moses, to whom the divine glory - Christ - was revealed between the cherubim of the testimony on the lid of the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies, drawing back the curtain between the Holy and the Holy of Holies, was shining the face of God

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faces of the cherubim. (He talks of the four faces) because four faces are those who keep the universe: a man, a lion, a bull, and the eagle. Man can be compared to air because it is a heavenly plant; lion with fire, because of its agility and power; the bull calf with the earth, and the eagle with water, because the birds were born of water. Each of these is in turn composed of four elements. In the midst of all is God who is the beginning, middle and end of all that exists; He made the world, at the counsel of His will, of earth, air, water and fire, and runs like a chariot with four horses". METODIU DE OLIMP, *Aglaofon sau despre înviere*, II, x, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 10, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1984, p. 178; our translation from the Romanian integral edition of Methodius works following the Migne edition and that of G. Bonwetsch, "Methodius", in: *Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller 27* (1917). Also available online at <https://archive.org/details/methodiusherausg00meth/page/n4>. This gives the Slavonic material in German translation (only) interspersed with the Greek fragments. *Aglaophon or On the resurrection* (Ἀγλαοφῶν ἢ περὶ ἀναστάσεως), in three books. (CPG 1812) It refutes the idea of a purely spiritual resurrection. The Greek is extant in fragments, including a long quotation from book 1 by Epiphanius in the Panarion. The Old Slavonic version includes all three books, but abbreviates book 3. Ed. Bonwetsch, 217–424, giving a German translation of the Old Slavonic. A small piece is translated in the ANF at [http://www.tertullian.org/fathers2/ANF-06/anf06-122.htm#P5754\\_1736951](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers2/ANF-06/anf06-122.htm#P5754_1736951). The Greek can be found in PG18, 265–329, and Richard's Opera Minora. UPDATE: There is now a complete Italian translation by Zorza and Mejzner.

recreating the image of the cherub on which “the likeness of the glory of the Lord shone” (Ez 1, 28) being a messenger of God, like the Son, to deliver, guide, organize and save the people, being clothed with the garment of divine glory so that the children of Israel could not look at his face imprinted with the divine glory that was revealed on the lid of the Ark of the Covenant between the Cherubim of the testimony. (cf. Ex 34, 30 and 35; 2 Cor 3, 7, 13)

It is precisely in this perspective that the philosophical and religious tradition of the world affirms, through the myth of the winged soul, that man is not, ultimately, a fulfilled and totally autonomous being, but is called to travel, in the vehicle of his soul, to the celestial realm of the ether, regaining his soul’s wings and inner illumination. If in this Platonic myth and in the same myth found in the Vedanta we find a somewhat similar identification, the intellect, reason or the part of the soul that must guide the soul towards truth being represented by the charioteer, the thoroughbred horse representing the rational or moral impulse or the positive part of the passionate nature (for example, righteous indignation) and the other horse, a wild one, representing the passions, appetite or concupiscent nature of the soul (in the Vedanta the chariot horses represent the senses), in Homily I of Pseudo-Macarius, where it is interpreted the vision of the throne of divine glory – the Merkabah of Ezekiel 1-10, the role of the charioteer of the intellect is taken by the Logos-Christ, the soul representing the chariot or throne of divine glory, and the four living beings that drew the chariot prefigure the ruling faculties of the soul. We also see that the purpose of the journey of the chariot of the soul is its winging and entry into the spiritual and luminous realm of the ether, the celestial world of the gods – in the Platonic version, its escape from the Samsara cycle of reincarnations in the Vedanta, and its deification through synergy with the Logos Christ in Christianity.

Macarius the Egyptian calls the soul the face of God, referring to its tetradic structure as a throne of cherubim made up of 4 *eidos* or faces, corresponding to these 4 faces are, as St. Methodius of Olympus summarizes, the 4 elements of creation: water, air, fire, earth. In his first Homily, Pseudo-Macarius identifies the soul with exactly the same image of the cherubic throne, whose faces are the symbols of the organic powers

through which he is directing and ruling it:<sup>34</sup> Also here, a little bit further, Saint Macarius is referring to the Adam soul as “**this shining creature, which God has created in his image**” with which the wicked snake has vested himself when Adam has trespassed the commandment of God and listened to the devil. (Omil I.7, p.40) The man’s soul is affirmed by Saint Macarius as a “shining creature created by God in his image”, and its structure is referring to the four *essentia* of creation through which God created all the material and imagined things. Saint Macarius affirms: “The soul is neither by nature divine nor by nature part of the darkness of wickedness, but is a creature, intellectual, beautiful, unique, and admirable. It is a *beautiful likeness and image of God*. Into that likeness the wickedness of the passions of the dark world entered through the fall” (Omil I. 7, p. 41).

## V. Conclusion

God created in an organic manner the cosmos and the human world as an image of his Being expressed through his *essentia*. There is a rich and complex tradition about this perspective, but, although the image of God was identified variously in the Holy Trinity, in creation, in man and in revelation, the ancient tradition of understanding His superessential Being as expressed through his Ideas, *eidos*, forms, etc, was in some measure forgotten, and it was our trying in this study to make it more clearly understood.

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<sup>34</sup> “The four animals that bore the chariot were a type of the leading characteristics of the soul. For as the eagle rules over all the other birds and the lion is king of the wild beasts and the bull over the tamed animals and man rules over all creatures, so the soul has certain dominant powers that are superior to others. I am speaking of the faculties of the will: conscience, the mind and the power of loving. For it is through such that the chariot of the soul is directed and it is in these that God resides” (Omil I. 3, p. 38). PSEUDO-MACARIUS, *The fifty spiritual homilies and The great letter*; edited and translated with an introduction by George A. Maloney; preface by Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia, Paulist Press, NY, 1992, *The Great Letter*, p. 38