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The "spiritual essence" of St. Antony and its counterparts in other culturally–historical contexts

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Introduction

In his book devoted to the Letters of St. Antony Samuel Rubenson characterized the anthropology of the founder of monasticism writing that "…man's real self, his nature, is his 'spiritual essence'… This essence is now hidden in the body, but it does not belong to it, and will not be dissolved with it… Individuality is manifested in body and soul, while the 'spiritual essence' is manifest in the mind, which is created in the image of God's mind, Christ, and thus equal for all."[1] "The body is to Antony not evil per se, nor is it responsible for its misuse… In his letter on repentance (Letter I) he describes how each member of the body can be purified, how by ousting the evil it can be made a seat of virtue… all can become pure through the work of the mind guided by the Spirit."[2]

This scholar put the ideas of St. Antony, expressed in his Letters, into the context of the Platonic and Origenist teachings. Without challenging these doctrinal relations of the ideas found in the texts attributed to the founder of monasticism, it seems reasonable to consider their more general characteristic features within the framework of late antique and medieval culture and the religious milieus other than Christian. For this purpose in this paper I would intend to make an attempt at adducing some parallels to the notion of the "spiritual/intellectual essence/nature," and in this way broadening the spiritual and intellectual context in which the ideas and the ways of their expression, contained in the writings of St. Antony, acquired their proper forms. In the course of our analysis and process of comparison of notions and ideas in seemingly remote historical and religious contexts, similar to that contained in the Letters of St. Antony, the whole picture of their genetic relations will become, probably, more evident, which may justify an undertaken rather unusual approach to the subject under consideration.

The spiritual/intellectual nature of St. Antony and a conception of the primordial luminous man

In his article devoted to the problem of early Christian anthropological conceptions Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta has observed that in the context of the tripartite anthropology in ancient Christian tradition the notions of the nous and pneuma are interchangeable, since in the tripartite structure in the Acts of Andrew man consists of the intellect, soul and body, while in the valentinian teaching man consists of spirit, soul and body.[3] Moreover, in the Acts of Andrew "the intellect is conceived of as the highest and most divine element and as such is called 'man' (person)."[4] To this might be added that Wesley Williams used the Valentinian texts for the reconstruction of an esoteric Jewish teaching about the (d)evolution of the spiritual Man-Light created on the first day,[5] and Origen in his First Homily on Genesis 2 explicitly equates the spirit and intellect, which is the spiritual man capable of the vision of God.[6] And St. Antony, as it was noted by Rubenson, following Origen, calls "his correspondents 'Israelites', or 'holy Israelites in their spiritual essence', which he… interprets as 'a mind that sees God'."[7] It can be observed that the equation of spirit and intellect, as it seems, goes back to the Paulinian First Letter to the Corinthians 2:10-16 where Paul discusses the superiority of the pneumaticos anthrōpos over the psychicos anthrōpos, and concludes, as Gilles Quispel has remaked, that "we, however, St. Paul adds, have the "noun", that is: we have the "pneuma" of Christ (2,16)."[8]

A similar association of the Spirit and the intellectual substance of a human being can be traced in the Letters of Saint Antony the Great, although, as it was noted by Rubenson, Antony's "letters do not equate the mind with the spirit, but with a few exceptions reserve the term 'spirit' for the gift given to man by God. Therefore, the spirit is according to Antony not a part of man, but a gift of God."[9] Nevertheless, this "gift of God" serves as an instructor for a human being in the process of the knowledge of one's self.

For if a man draws near to grace, then Jesus will say to him, 'I will no longer call you servants, but I will call you my friends and

[1]S. Rubenson, The Letters of St. Antony: Origenist Theology, Monistic Tradition and the Making of a Saint. (Lund: Univesrity press, 1990): 68.
[2]Ibid, p. 71.
[3]L. Roig Lanzillotta, "One Human Being, Three early Christian Anthropologies: An Assessment of Acta Andreae's Tenor on the Basis of Its Anthropological Views," in Vigiliae Christianae 61 (2007): 425-427.
[4]Ibid., p. 425.
[5]"According to the Nag Hammadi tractate On the Origin of the World 117:29ff, "the first Adam is spirit-endowed (pneumaticos), and appeared on the first day. The second Adam is soul-endowed (psychikos), and appeared on the sixth day, which is called Aphrodite. The third Adam is a creature of the earth (choicos), that is, the man of law, and he appeared on the eighth day" These three Adams are not individual men; they are stages in the somatic (d)evolution of Man. This somatic tripartition, common in Gnostic texts, is based on a popular reading of Genesis 1-2. The pneumaticos or spiritual first Adam, born on the first day, is associated both with the Spirit of God that hovered over the pre-mundane waters (Gen 1:2) and, more commonly, the light of Gen. 1:3. The latter reading is based on a pun on the Greek word phōs, used in the LXX translation of Gen. 1:3 meaning both light" and "man." Thus, the product of God's command, "Let there be light (phōs)," was a divine Light-Man, as anthropos enveloped within and consisting of light."(W. Williams, THE SHADOW OF GOD. Speculations on the Body Divine in Jewish Esoteric Tradition.
[6]Homiliae in Genesim I, 2, 10-18. "Cum enim omnia quae facturus erat Deus ex spiritu constarent et corpore, ista se cause in principio et ante onmia caelum dicitur factum, id est omnis spiritalis substantia super quam uelut in throno quodam et sede Deus requiescit. Istud autem caelum, id est firmamentum, corporeum est. Et ideo illud quidem primum caelum, quod spiritale diximus, mens nostra est, quae et ipsa spiritus est, id est spiritalis homo noster qui uidet ac perspicit Deum. (Origène, Homélies sur la Genèse, ed. L. Doutreleau, Sources chrétiennes 7bis (Paris: Cerf, 1977): 28)
[7]Rubenson, the Letters of St. Antony…, p. 69.
[8]G. Quispel, "Hermes Trismegistus and the Origins of Gnosticism," in Vigiliae Christianae 46 (1992): 6.
[9]Rubenson, The Letters of St. Antony…, p. 68-69.

my brothers: for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you.' (John 15:15.) For those who have drawn near, and have been taught by the Holy Spirit, have known themselves according to their intellectual substance.[10]

According to Anthony the Great, the self of a Christian as his intellectual substance is one, which means that the celestial self can be manifest in a neighbour, and by this the knowledge of God is achieved, which is stated in the following passage: And all these names are given them, be they man or woman, according to the different principle of their works; for all are from one. For this cause, therefore, he who sins against his neighbour sins against himself; and he who does evil to his neighbour does evil to himself; and he who does good to his neighbour, does good to himself. Otherwise, who is able to do ill to God, or who is there who could hurt Him, or who could refresh Him, or who could ever serve Him, or who could ever bless Him, that He should need his blessing, or who is able to honour Him with the honour that is His due, or to exalt Him as He deserves? Therefore, while we are still clothed in this heavy body, let us rouse up God in ourselves by incitement of each other, and deliver ourselves to death for our souls and for each other; and if we do this, we shall be manifesting the substance of His compassion for us. Let us not be lovers of ourselves, so as not to become subject to their inconstant power. For he who knows himself, knows all men. Therefore, it is written, 'He called all things out of nothingness into being.' (Cf. Wisd. 1:14.) Such statements refer to our intellectual nature, which is hidden in this body of corruption, but which did not belong to it from the beginning, and is so to be freed from it. But he who can love himself,loves all men.[11]

In this construction one can recognize the teaching about a primordial Man-Light, constituting the "intellectual nature," while the individuals are differentiated by their names,[12] that is, by another expression of a celestial self of a Christian believer. It this way, it seems probable that the conception of the "spiritual (or intellectual) essence" in the Letters of St. Antony may have implications of the ancient Jewish and Jewish-Christian mystical teachings about the primordial creation of the First Man as a luminous spiritual entity.

An intellectual luminous nature in the cosmographia of Bernardus Silvestris

The evidence of the survival of the conception of the spiritual and intellectual nature of the primordial human creature can be traced, as it seems, in a remote context in the Latin West, since one encounters in the writings of Eriugena the notion on the "intellectual nature." In his article "Jean Scot et la Métaphysique des Nombres" Edouard Jeauneau attracted a scholarly attention to the passage from the Periphyseon III. 108-122, containing the discussion of the nature of numbers.

According to Eriugena, if the numbers always remain in the unity, they are eternal, since what always remains is eternal. Therefore, nobody can have any doubt concerning the eternity of the numbers. However, the numbers are also created (facti); they are eternal in the monad, but created in their being multiplied. The first explanation of these seemingly contradictory statements consists in the following argument: the numbers are eternal in the monad vi et potestate, and they are created in the genera and species actu et opere. For the clarification of this idea Eriugena uses a comparison of the numbers with the liberal arts. Every art (ars) is contained in the most secret recesses of the intellectual nature (in secretissimis intellectualis naturae sinibus) in a simple form, without division, quantity, quality, place, time, or any accident.[13]

As it was discussed by Jeauneau, in Eriugena the Son, the Word of God, is in the "sinus" of the Father and is himself the "sinus" of the Father. In the Word of God were created the primordial causes, which are the "nature created and creating", and thus the expression "sinus naturae" is usually meant by Eriugena to denote the primordial causes. Eriugena makes a distinction between all what is produced from the primordial causes "in matter and form in times and places" (in materia et forma in temporibus et locis), which belong to the realm conventionally called by men "being", and all what remains in these primordial causes, "naturae sinibus", which, according to the same convention, is called "non-being".[14]

Furthermore, in the opinion of Peter Dronke, the Eriugenian conception of the "recesses of the nature" (sinus naturae), probably, was adapted and re-worked by the twelfth-century author Bernardus Silvestris in his work Cosmographia (De mundi unversitate). As it was observed by this scholar, "it is worth noting that, when Scotus speaks of the primordial causes as 'Nature that both creates and is created', he often inclines to personification. He speaks of the causes 'in the most secret recesses of Natura's breasts' (in secretissimis Naturae sinibus), or of 'Natura's most secret and intimate breasts' (secretissimos intimosque Naturae sinus) – this last phrase also signifying for him the midpoint of Paradise. Such expressions, which do not originate with Scotus, but which he developed with a flair and abundance previously unparalleled, have been admirably studied recently by Edouard Jeauneau."[15]

One may note also in the Cosmographia of Bernardus Silvestris the role, attributed to the personified Nature, the origin and character of which is a much discussed and controversial matter.[16] This Nature is the "blessed fruitfulness"[17] of the womb of Nous who, in its turn, is "the fountain of light, seed-bed of life, a good born of the divine goodness, that fullness of knowledge which is called the "mind" of the most high. This Noys, then, is the intellect of supreme and all-powerful God, a nature born of His divinity. In her are the images of unfailing life, the eternal likenesses, the intelligible universe, sure knowledge of things to come. There, as though in a clearer glass, might be seen all that God's hidden will brings to pass through

[10]The Letters of Saint Antony the Great. Translated with an Introduction by D. J. Chitty. (Oxford: SLG Press, 1975): 12.

[11]Ibid., p. 20-21.

[12]As Rubenson has observed, "In origin all are the same, it is only because of the differences in their acts of 'flight; from God that there is difference in names between them." (Rubenson, The Letters of St. Antony…, p. 66).

[13]E. Jeauneau, "Jean Scot et la Métaphysique des Nombres," in Beierwaltes W. (ed.), Begriff und Metapher: Sprachform des Denkens bei Eriugena. Vorträge des VII. Internationalen Erugena-Colloquiums, Bad Homburg, 26-29 Juli 1989 (Abhandlungen der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, phil.-hist. Klasse, 1990.3). (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1990): 131-133.

[14]E. Jeauneau, Quatre thèmes érigéniens. (Paris: J. Vrin; Montréal: Institut d'études médiévales Labert-le-Grand, 1978): 39-44.

[15]P. Dronke, "Bernard Sivestris, Natura, and Personification," in Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 43 (1980): 25.

[16]B. Stock, Myth and Science in the Twelfth Century: A Study of Bernard Sylvester. (Princeton: University press, 1972): 16-31.

[17]The Cosmographia of Bernardus Silvestris. A Translation with Introduction and Notes by W. Wetherbee (New York and London: Columbia university press, 1973): 69.

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temporal generation, or by divine act."[18] The image of the "fountain of light" evokes the "fountain of celestial light… spreading in mystical emanations into lights which illumine the whole world"[19] from the Book II, 183-184 of the The Marriage of Philology and Mercury of Martianus Capella where the solar bark is described, and in this way the Nous is associated with the sun.

A phrase "Natura, mater generationis," as it was established by Stock, is taken by Bernardus from Abu Ma'shar,[20] and Abu Ma'shar was interested in Sabianism,[21] the traces of which can be found in the 10th–11th century Arabic book of astrological magic Ghāyat al-Hakīm (the "Goal of the Sage"),[22] written in Spain and known in the Latin translation under the title Picatrix.[23] The sixth chapter of the Book III of this treatise is devoted to the invocation of an astronomic entity called the Perfect Nature, which appears to a wise man in a personified shape. This chapter is claimed by the author to be based upon the material of a Hermetic text Kitāb al-Istamākhis, which belongs to the creative activity of a "group of Harranian Neoplatonizing intellectuals, claming to be Sabians and asserting that Hermes was their prophet…," who "thereafter produced a large body of pseudo-Hermetic and pseudo-Aristotelian literature, based in part on older Syrian Hermetic and Neoplatonic traditions, in part on Harranian paganism, and in part, presumably, on their own wits."[24] In this chapter the conception of the "Perfect Nature" appears as a personification, instructing Hermes in the secrets of the mystical knowledge: As for Hermes, he mentioned in his book that when he decided to get to the secret of creation he found a very dark basement wherein he could not see anything. Yet it had a strong wind going through it. It was so windy that he could not keep a light lit. That night he was visited in his dreams by a good looking spirit, that spirit told him to take a light and put it in a glass lamp to protect it from the wind and that will light the way for you. Then he told him to enter the basement and dig in the middle of it and take out a statue of a talisman that was made and buried there and he said if you take that statue out the wind will stop in that basement and it will also light up the rest of the place. Then he told him to dig in the four corners of the place and he will find the creations secret, nature's secrets and the wonders of things and their nature. So Hermes asked the spirit, who are you? And he answered him; I'm your perfect nature.[25]

The mystical presence of the divine apparition for the soul is described, with reference to this Hermetic book, exploring the image of the sun.

…when you first start to look inside of yourself, to your managing spirit that connects you with your star and that is the perfect nature that Hermes the Wise mentioned in his book saying that the microcosm, in which he meant the human, if he was perfected in his nature, his soul would be in the position of the stationary Sun in the sky that shines with its light on the whole world so as the perfect nature it spreads in the soul so its rays connects with the power of wisdom and pulls it till it is centered in the soul that is originally its place like exactly the Sun pulls the ray of the world and lifts it up in the sky.[26]

One may note that an astrological treatise Ghāyat al-Hakīm was translated into Latin under the title of "Picatrix" at the court of Alphonso the Wise of Castil in the 13th century, while the original Arabic text was written in the 10th–11th centuries, and the ideas underlying this treatise can be, at least indirectly, familiar to Bernardus Silvestris, who could use an image of the solar light to present the Nature, deriving this light from Nous.

In the text of Ghāyat al-Hakīm, Book 3, chapter 12 its author defines the notion of "nature" in the following way: In truth, it is an equivocal term. It stands (1) for 'living being', (2) for something which is peculiar to a thing, (3) for the humours, (4) for the world, for the heaven, and for the power made by the Creator, may He be exalted, to be the cause for the influence over coming-to-be and passing-away, and the movement and rest in everything which moves and rests. On account of this (a) the ancients defined it as follows: the principle of movement and rest. (b) The philosopher also defined it: form belonging to the heavenly bodies (sūra jismiyya), which is in the human body thought the mediation of the sphere between it and the soul.[27]

This passage, as Samuel M. Stern has observed,[28] is almost identical with the text from the 9th chapter from The Book of Definitions of a 9th-10th century Jewish physician and Neoplatonic philosopher Isaac Israeli, a native of Egypt, where this author presented various definitions of the conception of "Nature," among which a sphere is enumerated: 'Nature' is an equivocal term. It stands… for (5) the sphere and the spherical power which is appointed by the Creator, may He be exalted, in nature for the sake of influencing coming-to-be and passing-away, increase and decrease, movement and rest; for this reason the ancient philosopher defined it from its property (a) and said that 'nature' was movement out of rest and rest out of movement. The pholosopher defined it from its essence (b) by saying: 'Nature' is a power belonging to the heavenly body (quwwa jismiyya) which is in human bodies through the mediation of the sphere between the soul and the bodies.[29]

The Book of Definitions, containing the discussion of this conception, was translated into Latin by Gerard of Cremona (1114-87)

[18]Ibid., p. 73-74.

[19]Transl. by W.H. Stahl and R. Johnson with E.L. Burge; Martianus Capella and the Seven Liberal Arts, vol. II: The Marriage of Philology and Mercury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977): 57-58.

[20]Stock, Myth and Science…, p. 65; n. 7.

[21]D. Pingree, "The Sābians of Harrān and the Classical Tradition," in International Journal of the Classical Tradition 9 (2002): 25-29.

[22]Pseudo-Magrītī. Das Ziel des Weisen, ed. H. Ritter. (Leipzig: Studien der Bibliothek Warburg, 1933). A German translation: 'Picatrix'. Das Ziel des Weisen von Ps. Magrītī, trans. H. Ritter and M. Plessner. (London: The Warburg Institute; University of London, 1963). For recent studies on the author, title, and nature of this text see M. Fierro, "Bātinism in Al-Andalus. Maslama b. Qāsim al-Qurtubī (d. 353/964), Author of the "Rutbat al-Hakīm and the Ghāyat al-Hakīm (Picatix)," in Studia Islamica 84 (1996): 87-112; D. Pingree, "Some of the Sources of the Ghāyat al-hakīm," in Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 43 (1980): 1-15.

[23]Concerning the Latin title see J. Thomann, "The Name Picatrix: Transcription or Translation?" in Journal of the Warburg and Courtault Institutes 53 (1990): 289-296. The edition of the Latin text is Picatrix: The Latin Version of the Ghāyat Al-Hakīm, ed. D. Pingree. (London: The Warburg Institute; University of London, 1986).

[24]D. Pingree, "Some of the Sources…", p. 15.

[25]Transl. from Arabic by H. Atallah and G. Holmquest, in Picatix. Ghayat Al-Hakim, ed. W. Kiesel; vol 2. (Seattle: Ouroboros press, 2008): 55-56.

[26]Ibid., p. 60.

[27]The translation is from the book: Isaac Israeli, a Neoplatonic Philosopher of the Early Tenth Century. His Works Translated with comments and an outline of his Philosophy by A. Altmann and S.M. Stern (Oxford: University press, 1953): 51-52.

[28]Ibid., p. 51.

[29]Ibid., p. 50-51.

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and in an abbreviated version by an anonymous author,[30] and, probably, can be familiar to Bernardus Silvestris, in whose Cosmographia I, 2 can be found a presentation of the sphere as a lower manifestation of the world-soul: Then the world-soul, from the origin of life or of light, flowed down as if in a kind of emanation as the vitality and glory of the cosmos. In its descent it appeared as a globe of extended size and determined concetns, but which could not be seen with the eyes, only in the mind. Its quite clear substance presented the appearance of a liquid, flowing fountain.[31]

The discussed by Isaac Israeli "power belonging to the heavenly body which is in human bodies through the mediation of the sphere between the soul and the bodies," is, probably, echoed in the following statement of the author of Ghāyat al-Hakīm (Picatrix): Aristotle said that every philosopher has a power from the spirits that gives him inspiration and strength and opens the closed doors of wisdom that are connected to this power and that it is the philosopher's high star that affects him. This power grows with him and nourishes him.[32]

An idea, contained in this statement, probably, can be traced in the text of Cosmographia: …when the new design, the new creation of man has taken place, a "genius" will be assigned to watch over him (genius in eius custodiam deputatus), drawn from this most merciful and serviceable race of spiritual powers, whose benevolence is so deep-seated, and unalterable, that they shun, out of a hatred of evil, any contact with the vile or displeasing; but when, through the inspiration of divine powers, some virtuous act is undertaken, they are ever at hand… the genius which is joined to man from the first stages of his conception, and shows him, by forebodings of mind, dreams (soporis imagine), or portentous displays of external signs, the dangers to be avoided.[33]

Therefore, it seems possible that the Hermetic conception of the "Perfect Nature" is represented as the juncture of the luminous Nous and Natura-creatrix and as its counterpart in the form of a genius in an individual human being, and this conception, in general, might represent a version of the early Christian idea of a Primordial spiritual and intellectual Man, especially taking into consideration the suggestion of Gilles Quispel that the Hermetic conception of the primordial Man (Anthrōpos) in the Poimandres goes back to the description of the Glory of God made by Prophet Ezekiel as the form of Man (demuth kemarēh adam or eidos anthrōpou).[34] To this may be added that in the Cosmographia of Bernardus Silvestris, as it was demonstrated by Brian Stock,[35] is well attested the use of the Hermetic Latin Asclepius. However, it seems also that Bernardus reproduced a Platonised and Christianised version of the Hermetic myth on the whole in the way as it is presented in the Greek Poimandres, about the Mind (Nous) setting into order a primordial chaos and creating a primordial Man.

Concerning the nature and origin of the notion of a genius in the Cosmographia of Bernardus Silvestris Denise N. Baker made a remark that the "tradition of the tutelary Genius is derived from two central texts of the School of Chartres, the De Deo Socratis of Apuleius and the De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii of Martianus Capella."[36] The significance of the work of Martianus for the characterization of Natura and Nous in the De mundi univesitate was mentioned previously, while the conception of a guardian spirit in Apuleius was analyzed by John M. Rist in his article "Plotinus and the Daemonion of Socrates" as one of the "vulgarized" versions of the Platonic conception, which, nevertheless, served as links, connecting it with the idea of spirit-guide in Plotinus.[37] Rist has attracted a scholarly attention to the fact that, "after explaining that the voice heard by Socrates and described by Plato in the Phaedrus was no mere human voice, Apuleius tells us that he thinks that Socrates not only heard his daimonion, but that he also saw it–an entirely new and significant variation."[38] And, in the opinion of this scholar, the story of the apparition of god as a spirit-guide of Plotinus, evoked by an Egyptian priest in the Isaeum, narrated by Porphyry, could belong to this trend of approach to the Platonic conception of the daimonion. Further Rist observed that "all this is very far from Plotinus' own account of his spirit-guide which… is the one itself."[39] In this way, as we can see, St. Antony not only adhered to the Plotnian idea of the original unity of being, noted by Rubenson, but this idea also refers to the conception of the spiritual guide, very similar to the Plotinian approach to this subject, although, as Rist observed, it did not play a major role in his thought.

A hermetic "Perfect Nature" and a Christian spiritual guide

On the other hand, Peter Dronke has demonstrated that in the Cosmographia of Bernardus Silvestris the earthly paradise, the "gramision" where the new Man, that is, Homo-microcosmos, was made, can represent a re-elaboration of Eriugena's concept of the paradise as a human nature in its original divine condition.[40] This conception, probably, corresponds to the treatment of a "paradise greater than Eden" in the Book IV of the treatise On the Soul of the eleventh-century Byzantine author Niketas Stethatos, analyzed by Alexander Golitzin, where Niketas wrote that the "human being [anthropos] is seen as a kind of great [world] in the small… God created together with the soul, in the soul, in the whole of the human being made according to His image, the intelligible and invisible world in order that it may be contemplated here [i.e., in the human person] as neighbor to the perceptible."[41] This theme is also continued in the treatise Contemplation of Paradise: "God made the human being in the beginning as a great world… thus, as in a greater world, He planted intelligibly in him another divine paradise greatly transcending the perceptible one… [which] is illuminated by the sun of righteousness. This, indeed, is the place of the Kingdom of Heaven."[42]

[30]Ibid., p. 4-5.
[31]Stock, Myth and Science…, p. 123.
[32]Trans. from Arabic by H. Atallah and G. Holmquest, in Picatix. Ghayat Al-Hakim…, p. 57.
[33]The Cosmographia of Bernardus Silvestris. A Translation with Introduction and Notes by W. Wetherbee…, p. 107.
[34]Quispel, "Hermes Trismegistus…" p. 1; Idem., "Ezekeil 1:26 in Jewish Mysticism and Gnosis," in Vigiliae Christianae 34 (1980): 6.
[35]Stock, Myth and Science…, p. 102-105; 150-162; 170-172.
[36]D.N. Baker, "The Priesthood of Genius: a Study of the Medieval Tradition," in Speculum 51 (1976): 282.
[37]J.M. Rist, "Plotinus and the Daemonion of Socrates," in Phoenix 17 (1963): 13-24.
[38]Ibid., p. 22.
[39]Ibid., p. 23.
[40]P. Dronke, "Eiugena's Earthly Paradise," in Begriff und Metapher: Sprachform des Denkens bei Eriugena, ed W. Beierwaltes; Vorträge des VII. Internationalen Erugena-Colloquiums, Bad Homburg, 26-29 Juli 1989 (Abhandlungen der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, phil.-hist. Klasse, 1990.3) (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1990): 213-229.
41A. Golitzin, "Hierarchy Versus Anarchy? Dionysius Areopagita, Symeon the New Theologian, Nicetas Stethatos, and Their Common Roots in Ascetical Tradition," in Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly 38 (1994): 143.
[42]Ibid., p. 26-27.

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This kind of imagery can go back to a conception, elaborated in the context of a Syriac Christianity in the writings a Greek-speaking Syriac author of the fourth century commonly known as Ps.-Macarius. As Kallistos Ware has observed, "his precise identity is a mystery and is likely to remain such, unless fresh evidence comes unexpectedly to light… There is general agreement that the author of the Macarian writings has no connection with the Coptic Desert Father, St. Macarius of Egypt (c. 300-c.190). The milieu presupposed in the Homilies is definitely Syria rather than Egypt. Although the language used by the author is Greek, his highly distinctive vocabulary and imagery are Syrian… the Homilies date basically from 380s, and are probably written in Mesopotamia and Asia Minor."[43] For this author, the sun and the light are the symbols of the comprehension of God by outer and inner man: "As the eyes of the sensible vision see the sensible sun, so the eyes of the soul should see the intelligible light of the sun of "justice"[44] (Hom. II Aus Typus III)". The visible sun is compared to the soul, which is on the earth with its earthly thoughts, while the pure soul with its celestial thoughts is considered to be higher than the sun in the spiritual celestial realm. (49, 3, 32-41) For as the sun when it has come up upon the earth is totally on the earth, but when it comes to the setting in the west, it brings together all of its rays, retiring to its own home, so too the soul that is not reborn from above of the Spirit is totally on the earth, scattered about in thoughts and mind over the earth, even unto its ends. When it is deemed worthy to receive the heavenly birth and communion of the Spirit, it brings together all of its thoughts, and, taking them with it, it enters unto the Lord into the heavenly dwelling, not made by hands. And all its thoughts become heavenly and pure and holy, passing into the divine air.[45]

This two-layered construction resembles a Hermetic anthropological conception transmitted by a 3rd century alchemist Zosimus of Panopolis, according to whom, as Henry Corbin described it, "there is the earthly Adam, the outer man of flesh… subject to the Elements, to planetary influences, and to Fate; the four letters comprising his name[46] "encipher" the four cardinal points of the earthly horizon. And there is the man of light…, the hidden spiritual man, the opposite pole to corporeal man."[47]

Furthermore, according to Corbin, the conception of the "Perfect Nature" in a referred previously Ghāyat al-Hakīm (the "Goal of the Sage") originates from the ancient Christian writings, such as the Hymn of the Pearl or Shepherd of Hermas. This scholar compared the mystical experience of Hermas with the similar experience of the narrator of a Hermetic treatise Poimandres, where at the beginning of the treatise he recognizes his celestial Self as the Nous. Corbin described this experience in the following way: "Hermas is at home, seated on his bed in a state of deep meditation. Suddenly a strange-looking personage enters, sits down at his side and announces: "I have been sent by the Most Holy Angel to live beside thee all the days of thy life." Hermas thinks that the apparition is trying to tempt him: "Who art thou then? For I know to whom I have been entrusted." Then he said to me: "Dost thou not recognize me?" "No," "I am the Shepherd to whose care thou hast been entrusted." And while he spoke, his aspect changed. And behold I recognized the one to whom I had been entrusted.

Whether or not one is willing to see in the prologue of Hermas a Christian replica to the Hermetic Poimander, the fact remains that Christology was not originally quite what it later became."[48] Corbin also noted that the etymology of the name "Poimandres" can imply the notions of both the "Nous" and the "Shepherd" (ποιμήν). The problem of the etymology of the title "Poimandres" was studied in detail by Peter Kingsley who demonstrated that the name Poimandres is of Egyptian origin and means "Understanding of Re" or "Intelligence of Re", and that this figure, in fact, introduces itself by the etymology of its own name, translated into Greek; this concept refers to the Ancient Egyptian personified and divinised abstraction Sia, "Understanding" or "Intelligence", often associated, and in fact identified with one of the sons of Re, the god of knowledge and wisdom Thoth; in the creation of the universe he assists Re together with another divinised abstraction, Ḥu, "Word" or "Command".[49] On the other hand, the same scholar wrote that the "transcription of the Egyptian name P-eime nte-rē into Greek in the specific form Poimandres is – in itself – perfectly understandable; and yet there can be little doubt that at the same time other factors were at work here as well. Any Greek-speaking native of Egypt would almost certainly have been aware that 'shepherd of the people' was a standard phrase in Homer; Aeschilus had used the one-word expression 'shepherd-of-men' (poimenanōr), while the theme of a shepherd of men (poimēn andrōn) received a further boost from Platonic literature; and, last but not least, personal names formed from the basic world Poimēn, 'shepherd', were far from unusual in Graeco-Roman Egypt."[50] In this case, one can suppose an opposite play in the title of the Shepherd of Hermas (Ποιμὴν Ἑρμοῦ), namely, that the name Hermas can be associated with the name Hermes (especially considering that the form of the genitive case of both names is the same, Ἑρμοῦ), which intentionally points to the connection with the Hermetic context.

Concerning the nature of the Hermas' Shepherd, Corbin remarked that "it is not by chance that in the little book of Hermas the expressions "Son of God," "Archangel Michael," "Most Holy Angel," and "Magnificent Angel" are interchangeable.[51] According to the study made by Bogdan Bucur, it would be more correctly to say that the "Son of God" is identified with the angelomorphic supreme "holy spirit,"[52] and one may note also that, as it was indicated by Birger A. Pearson, the collection of texts from the first half of the second century, called

[43]K. Ware, "Preface" to Pseudo-Macarius, The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter, tr. G.A. Maloney. (New York : Paulist press, 1992) : x-xi, with reference to C. Stewart, "Working the Earth of the Heart. " The Messalian Controversy in History, Texts, and Language to AD 431 (Oxford: Univesity pres, 1991). Edition of the Homilies is: Die 50 Geistlichen Homilien des Makarios, ed. H. Dörries, E. Klostermann, M. Kroeger; PTS 4. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1964).

[44]Ὥσπερ δὲ οἱ τῆς αἰσθητῆς ὄψεως ὀφθαλμοὶ ὁρῶσι τὸν αἰσθητὸν ἥλιον, οὕτω δεῖ τοῖς τῆς ψυχῆς ὀφηαλμοῖς ὁρᾶν τὸ νοερὸν φῶς τοῦ ἡλίου τῆς "δικαιοσύνης"… Neue Hominien des Makarius/Symeon (Aus Typus III), ed. E. Klostermann and H. Berthold. (Texte und Untesuchungen zur Geschichte der Altchristlichen Literatur 72) (Berlin: Akademie verlag, 1961): 9,28 – 10,2.

[45]Transl. by G.A. Maloney, in Pseudo-Macarius, The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter, tr. G.A. Maloney (New York : Paulist press, 1992): 241.

[46]Namely, α – ἀνατολή (sunrise, east), δ – δύσις (sunset, west), α – ἄρκτος (the Bear, north), μ – μεσημβρία (midday, south). For the adaptation of this conception in the Jewish mystical tradition see : A. Orlov, "'Without Measure and Without Analogy:' Shi'ur Qomah Traditions in 2 (Slavonic) Enoch," in Journal of Jewish Studies 56(2005): 224-244.

[47]H. Corbin, The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism, translated by N. Pearson (Boulder & London: Shambala, 1978): 14.

[48]Ibid., p. 26-27.

[49]P. Kingsley, "Poimandres: the Etymology of the Name and the Originas of the Hermetica," in Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Istitutes 56 (1993): 1-24.

[50]Ibid., p. 11.

[51]Corbin, The Man of Light…, p. 26-27.

[52]B. Bucur, "The Son of God and the Angelomorphic Holy Spirit: A Recreating of the Shepherd's Christology" in Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 98 (2007): 120-142.

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the Shepherd of Hermas, can be found among "the extant Christian manuscripts (or fragments thereof) dating to the second century and preserved in Egypt,"[53] and, as Albertus F.J. Klijn has remarked, one cannot deny a certain popularity of this text in Egypt.[54] In this way, this collection of writings was known in the spiritual milieu, in which the ideas and conceptions of St. Antony originated and found their written and oral expressions.

On the other hand, in his numerous studies Corbin has demonstrated how the Hermetic conception of the "Perfect Nature" was developed by Iranian Islamic philosophers in whose writings this entity is named the philosopher's "Witness in Heaven," his "suprasensory personal Guide," "Sun of the mystery," "sun of the heart," "Sun of high knowledge," "Sun of the Spirit"."[55]

One may observe that similar ideas and terminology were used in the Christian tradition, namely, in the mentioned previously Contemplation of Paradize by Niketas Stethatos, analyzed by Alexander Golitzin, who discovered there the features of the ancient Jewish and Christian apocalyptic tradition. Golitzin has indicated that Niketas highlighted the role of a spiritual experience of a Christian instructor whom he calls the "true bishop" and who is "both initiate and communicator of heavenly mysteries."[56] This scholar described in the following words the conception of a true spiritual father according to Niketas Stethatos and its supposed origins: "the "true bishop," "initiate," "Mystagogue," and "priest of the divine mysteries" has a number of other titles as well. These include mediator (μεσίτης), leader or abbot (ἡγούμενος), lawgiver (νομοθέτης), guide (ὁδηγός), teacher (διδάσκαλος) physician (ἰατρός), nazirite (ναζιραῖος), prophet (προφήτης), sage, friend of God, spiritual father "begetting other souls in Christ," theologian, apostle, and finally, "earthly angel" (ἐπίγειος ἄγγελος), and "heavenly man" (ἄνθρωπος οὐράνιος). This list, particularly the first and last titles, mediator and earthly angel/heavenly man, leads me to suggest that, for Niketas, the place of the otherworldly being in the ancient apocalypses who acts as guide and interpreter for the seer, the angelus interpres, is taken over by the spiritual father. The latter, in and for himself, stands surely in the place of the ancient seer of apocalyptic. He is transformed into light and has acquired angelic status, but, and precisely in view of the latter change, he becomes indeed for other their "guide" and "interpreter," the one who directs his disciples to a like experience of heaven and who then explains the vision's meaning."[57]

The difference from the Hermetic and Iranian Sufi understanding of the "celestial guide" is that in this role is considered a holy man, in whom, like in the figure of Pachomius, invisible God is seen as in a mirror. The pupils of St. Pachomius, as is recorded in the Greek Vita 22, "as if, through the purity of his heart, were seeing the invisible God as in a mirror" (ὡς ὁρῶν τὸν ἀόρατον θεὸν τῇ καθαρότητι τῆς καρδίας ὡς ἐν ἐσόπτρῳ).[58] Therefore, for a Christian believer to contemplate a saint would mean to encounter his celestial self and be saved. This can be a representation of another version of the spiritual Nature/Essence of St. Antony, which is a the celestial Self of a Christian, one for all of them and at the same time manifested in the neighbor, only contrary to the anti-anthropomorphite approach to God, characteristic of the religious thought of St. Antony, this time the invisible God can be seen in a mirror of a spiritual guide, represented by a real human being.

Conclusion

As it can be seen from the previous discussion, the terms used by St. Antony for the characterization of his conception of a "spiritual/intellectual nature" correspond to the ancient Christian tripartite anthropological construction, on the top of which a true Christian acquires, as St. Paul says in his First Letter to the Corinthians 2:10-16, the mind ("noun") of Christ, that is, becomes the pneumaticos anthrōpos. On the other hand, the term "intellectual nature" was employed by Eriugena in the Latin early medieval cultural context, and the conception of the "secret recesses" of this intellectual nature was, probably, re-elaborated later by Benardus Silvestris in his Cosmographia, into the personifications of Mind (Nous) and Natura, the main characters playing major roles in the process of creation of a new perfect Man (homo perfectus). Besides, the conception of a personified Natura in Bernardus Silvestis could acquire its form and meaning under the influence of a Hermetic notion of a "Perfect Nature," which can be found in the Arabic book of astrological magic Ghāyat al-Hakīm (the "Goal of the Sage"), known in the Latin translation under the title Picatrix, while an anthropological aspect of this entity was, probably, reflected as a notion of a genius, a spirit-guide, born with a man and inherent in him. Furthermore, this idea of a spirit-guide, connected with a Hermetic conception of the "Perfect Nature," can be found in such heterogeneous but genetically interconnected writings as an early Christian collection of texts called the Shepherd of Hermas, the treatises of a Byzantine author Niketas Stethatos, and even medieval Iranian Islamic philosophers. In this way, one may come to a conclusion that St. Antony belonged to a broader cultural context of Late Antiquity and Middle Ages, where the cosmological unity of a spiritual creature correlated with an anthropological conception of a heavenly spiritually-intellectual guide, instructing a sage. Moreover, this basic conception found its various expressions in diverging and converging images and terminology belonging to late antique and medieval different philosophical and religious tradition.

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Conflict of interest

Author declares there is no conflict of interest.

[53]B.A. Pearson, "Earliest Christianity in Egypt: Some Observations," in The Roots of Egyptian Christianity, ed. B.A. Pearson and J.E. Goering. (Philadelphia: Fortress press, 1986): 133.

[54]A.F.J. Klijn, "Jewish Christianity in Egypt," in The Roots of Egyptian Christianity, ed. B.A. Pearson and J.E. Goering. (Philadelphia: Fortress press, 1986): 166.

[55]The summary of the results of these studies is presented in Corbin, The Man of Light…, p. 8-9.

[56]A. Golitzin, ""Earthly Angels and Heavenly Men": The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Niketas Stethatos, and the Tradition of "Interiorized Apocalyptic" in Eastern Christian Ascetical and Mystical Literature" in Dumbarton Oaks Papers 55 (2001): 137.

[57]Ibid., p. 137-138.

[58]M.S. Burrows, "On the Visibility of God in the Holy Man: a Recosideration of the Role of the Apa in the Pachomian Vitae," in Vigiliae Christianae 41 (1987): 15, 18.