

## *The Image of Light from Pagan Religious Thought to Christian Prayer*

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### RESUMEN

En el Cristianismo la luz simboliza por un lado la esencia de Dios, por el otro el esplendor de la vida eterna que él otorga a los beatos. Los dos sentidos tienen correlación y se encuentran en varios textos litúrgicos y oraciones, entre las más antiguas de las cuales están el Credo de Nicea y el *Requiem aeternam*.

Ambos sentidos se remontan a ideas antiguas que, en Grecia, ya se encuentran en la *Odisea*, y del punto de vista formal la dicción de las oraciones cristianas está a menudo profundamente influida por la tradición pagana, aunque su sustancia teológica se funde desde luego en el Viejo y en el Nuevo Testamento.

En ambos casos conceptos tradicionales se transfieren de la experiencia sensible al nivel de la transcendencia. La doctrina cristiana sigue la estela del Neoplatonismo, que ya había rebajado la luz física, del sol, de las estrellas y de todas fuentes materiales, al sentido de mero símbolo de otra luz más pura por encima y más allá de la experiencia, como se demuestra por unas comparaciones entre Séneca por un lado y Plotino, Porfirio, Macrobio y las oraciones cristianas por el otro.

**Palabras clave:** Paganismo, Cristianismo, Oración, Luz.

### SUMMARY

In Christianity light symbolizes the essence of God on the one hand, the glow of the eternal life granted to the blessed on the other. These two meanings are related and are found in several liturgical texts as well as in prayers, the Nicene Creed and the *Requiem aeternam* being among the oldest.

Both meanings go back to ancient ideas that, in Greece, can be traced as far back as the *Odyssey*, and from the formal point of view the phrasing of Christian prayers

is often deeply influenced by pagan tradition, though their theological substance is of course based on the Old as well as the New Testament.

In both cases traditional concepts are transferred from sensible experience to the level of transcendence. Christian doctrine follows in the wake of Neoplatonism, which had already demoted physical light—from the sun, the stars and all other material sources—to a mere symbol of a purer light above and beyond experience, as is shown through comparisons between Seneca on one side, Plotinus, Porphyrius, Macrobius and Christian prayers on the other.

**Keywords:** Paganism, Christianity, Prayer, Light.

In two prayers my mother taught me as a child, at a time when Catholics still prayed in Latin, the image of light takes on two peculiar meanings, that spell out two different symbols, both of which go back to very early times and, though separate and distinct, undergo a parallel evolution, first in pagan, then in Christian religious and philosophical thinking, often also interacting with and affecting each other.

The first one, the so called Nicene Creed, strictly speaking is not a prayer at all, but rather the statement of the Christian credo as established at the Council of Nicaea in A. D. 325. In it Christ is so defined: *deum de deo, lumen de lumine, deum uerum de deo uero* ("god from god, light from light, true god from true god"). According to this definition, the Son is a light proceeding from the light of the Father. This expression from the Nicene Creed has been often repeated by authors of Christian prayers, as is the case with Hilarius: *lumen fulsit de lumine* ("a light shone forth from a light")<sup>1</sup>, or with Paulinus of Nola: *filius, ex uero uerus, de lumine lumen* ("the Son, true from true, from light light")<sup>2</sup>.

The other prayer is the *Requiem aeternam*, or "Eternal rest", so called from its first two words. My mother made me recite this prayer as an intercession on behalf of the souls of the dead dwelling in Purgatory, but it goes back to a much earlier age than the time when the idea of Purgatory became an established and generally accepted dogma of the Church<sup>3</sup>. The opening words of this prayer are as follows: *Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine,*

<sup>1</sup> Hilarius, p. 32 Bulst, v. 11 (W. Bulst, *Hymni Latini antiquissimi LXXV, psalmi III*, Heidelberg 1956).

<sup>2</sup> Paulinus Nolanus, p. 7 Hartel, v. 82 (CSEL 30, 2, 1884). Cp. also Ambros. *hymn.* 2.2 (below, note 22).

<sup>3</sup> Cp. J. Le Goff, *La naissance du Purgatoire*, Paris 1981.

*et lux perpetua luceat eis* ("Eternal rest grant unto them, o Lord, and let perpetual light glow unto them"). These words are extracted from the second of the two opening chapters that were added to the Fourth Book of Esdras at an unknown time. The great Belgian scholar Franz Cumont, however, has shown<sup>4</sup> that they appear to be known as a formula in several funerary inscriptions dating from as early as the V and VI centuries A. D. In this passage added to the Fourth Book of Esdras we read: *Expectate pastorem uestrum, requiem aeternitatis dabit uobis... lux perpetua lucebit uobis per aeternitatem temporis* ("Await your shepherd: he shall give you the rest of eternity... perpetual light will shine unto you through the eternity of time")<sup>5</sup>. It is quite obvious that the prayer still used today is based upon this apocryphal text.

So, according to the Nicene Creed and the *Requiem aeternam*, light is considered on the one hand as the very essence of God; on the other it symbolizes the glow of immortal life awaiting the souls of the blessed. Both ideas are very old, and the evolution of the second has been extensively illustrated by Franz Cumont in a famous book quite aptly titled *Lux perpetua* ("Perpetual light")<sup>6</sup>.

As I have just stated, both themes go back to the remotest antiquity; but before presenting a summary discussion of their history, I would like to point out that they appear, separate but connected, ever since Christianity's earliest days. According to John, Jesus spoke of himself as the light of the world, while promising his followers the light of life: "I am the light of the world: those who follow me are not in danger of walking in shadow, but shall be granted the light of life"<sup>7</sup>.

The pairing of light with what is beautiful and desirable and of darkness with the opposite ideas is natural and can be found in most cultures and at most times. The analogy is epitomized by the widespread pairing of light with life, and of darkness with death. This contrast was prominent in the ancient religion of Iran, and it again acquired fundamental importance

<sup>4</sup> F. Cumont, *Recherches sur le symbolisme funéraire des Romains*, Paris 1942, 385-386.

<sup>5</sup> Esdr. 4[5].2.34-35. This is the text of the Latin version (*The Fourth Book of Ezra*. The Latin version edited from the Mss. by R. L. Bensly, Texts and Studies III 2, Cambridge 1895).

<sup>6</sup> F. Cumont, *Lux perpetua*, Paris 1949.

<sup>7</sup> Joh. 8.12 ἐγώ εἰμι τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου· ὁ ἀκολουθῶν ἐμοὶ οὐ μὴ περιπατήσει ἐν τῇ σκοτιᾷ, ἀλλ' ἔξει τὸ φῶς τῆς ζωῆς.

in late antiquity, for example in the credo of the Manicheans and in all variations of Gnosticism; but it was well-known to early Christianity too, as is shown by the passage of John (above) as well as by the beginning of his Gospel which I shall presently quote. We can safely assume, therefore, that the two symbolisms of light –as God on one side and as eternal life on the other– stem from the same root and that this affinity explains their mutual interaction.

Let us consider the former symbolism first. Already in Homer's *Odyssey* Telemachus is called "sweet light"<sup>8</sup> both by his faithful swineherd Eumaeus and by his own mother Penelope, and in Sophocles' *Electra* the heroine addresses her brother Orestes with the words "dearest light"<sup>9</sup>. As far as Roman epic poetry is concerned, it will suffice to recall that in Vergil Hector is called the "light of Troy"<sup>10</sup>. In view of these precedents it is hardly surprising that Christ or God should be referred to as "light" or something akin to the idea of light in a great number of Christian texts. Many of these texts are prayers, which can be found conveniently collected in Ricarda Liver's useful book on the influence of ancient sacred language on Christian prayer<sup>11</sup>.

But if the literary form of these Christian texts is undoubtedly influenced by formulations rooted in pagan tradition, their theological substance is of course based on easily identifiable passages of the Old as well as of the New Testament. In the opening of *Genesis* God is presented as the creator of light<sup>12</sup>, in a passage of simple and unaffected majesty that greatly impressed even the pagans, as is testified by the admiring quotation of the sentence "'Let there be light'. And there was light" as an example of stylistic sublimity by the anonymous author of the rhetorical treatise *Περὶ ὕψους* (*On sublimity*)<sup>13</sup>, probably in the I century A. D. And at the beginning of John's Gospel Jesus is identified with light as opposed to darkness: "in him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light

<sup>8</sup> Hom. *Od.* 16.23 = 17.41 Τηλέμαχε, γλυκερὸν φῶς.

<sup>9</sup> Soph. *El.* 1354 φίλτατον φῶς.

<sup>10</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 2.281 *lux Dardaniae*.

<sup>11</sup> R. Liver, *Die Nachwirkung der antiken Sakralsprache im christlichen Gebet des lateinischen und italienischen Mittelalters. Untersuchungen zu den syntaktischen und stilistischen Formen dichterisch gestalteten Gebete von den Anfängen der lateinischen Literatur bis zu Dante*, Bern 1979, 60-65.

<sup>12</sup> *Gen.* 1.3.

<sup>13</sup> Π. ὕψους 9.9 ὁ τῶν Ἰουδαίων θεσμοθέτης... εὐθὺς ἐν τῇ εἰσβολῇ γράψας τῶν νόμων· "Ἐἶπεν ὁ θεός" φησι· τί; "Γενέσθω φῶς, καὶ ἐγένετο· γενέσθω γῆ, καὶ ἐγένετο".

shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"<sup>14</sup>. And a few lines later: "The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world"<sup>15</sup>.

However, when we say that God is light, what remains to be determined is the nature and function of this light.

As made clear by Rudolf Bultmann, in a beautiful paper dating from over fifty years ago<sup>16</sup>, in ancient Greece, even in Plato, light was not conceived of as the object of contemplation in itself, but rather as the means to make reality comprehensible, even though the world we live in has its foundations in the supernatural domain of pure ideas. However, when the self-contained and self-explanatory organization based on the *polis* was replaced by the new system of absolute monarchies, not merely politics, but all of reality seemed to lose its rational guiding principle. The light that was sought after now was not meant to direct man in a friendly and understandable world regarded as home by most people; rather, light became synonymous with salvation from a foreign and hostile world as well as from the darkness beyond the grave. Obviously light itself now became the object of contemplation, to the point of nullifying the importance and the very existence of any sensible object which might be found within its compass. Now light has become transcendent in the proper meaning of the word.

The philosopher –and we might say the poet– *par excellence* of this preternatural light, stemming from the contemplation of the supreme transcendent reality, is Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism, some of whose pages strongly remind of the celebrated lines of Dante's Paradise describing the light of Heaven<sup>17</sup>. Plotinus' νοητὸν φῶς ("intellectual light")<sup>18</sup> is truly akin to Dante's *luce intellettuale* ("intellectual light"), though Dante of course immediately adds *piena d'amore* ("full of love")<sup>19</sup>.

Among the numerous prayers identifying Christ –or God– with light, which I mentioned before, just a few clearly state that such a light falls beyond sensible experience, and therefore cannot be properly described by

<sup>14</sup> Ioh. 1.4-5 ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων· καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτιᾷ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτιὰ αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβε.

<sup>15</sup> Ioh. 1.9 ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, ὃ φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον, ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον.

<sup>16</sup> R. Bultmann, "Zur Geschichte der Lichtsymbolik im Altertum", *Philologus* 97 (1948) 1-36, esp. 21 ff.

<sup>17</sup> See e. g. Plot. 6.7.36,16 ff.; 6.5.4,16 ff.; 6.9.9,47 ff.

<sup>18</sup> Plot. 6.9.9,58 φωτὸς πλήρη νοητοῦ.

<sup>19</sup> Dante *Par.* 30.40.

human language: only Fulgentius of Ruspe, in his *Abecedarium*, speaks *de illa superna luce quam nemo potest narrare* ("of that heavenly light that no one can describe")<sup>20</sup>. Many more, however, call Christ or God "light of light", *lux lucis* or *lucis lumen*<sup>21</sup>. One might be tempted to interpret such expressions as a Semitic linguistic influence common in Christian Latin to express the highest degree or importance of something, as in the case, for instance, of *rex regum* ("king of kings"). However, we can be sure that these formulas mean to stress that God is a light beyond light, which at the same time is the origin of all earthly light. As early an author as Ambrose begins one of his hymns by expressly stating that Christ, whom he too calls light of lights, is the fountainhead of all light: *lux lucis et fons luminis*<sup>22</sup>.

The evolution of the idea can best be illustrated by the varying meanings attached to the sun in the different phases of pagan and Christian religious thinking in the early centuries of our era. It is well-known that in late antiquity solar religion is the last attempt of paganism to ward off the impending triumph of Christianity through the worship of *Sol inuictus*, "the invincible Sun". Franz Cumont has studied this phenomenon in detail<sup>23</sup> and we possess an invaluable document of the speculations related to it in the numerous pages devoted by Macrobius in his *Saturnalia* to the identification of nearly all the traditional pagan deities with the sun<sup>24</sup>. No wonder that in Christian prayers Christ too should be often paired with the sun<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Fulg. Rusp. *Abeced.* 147, II, p. 881 Fraipont (CCSL XCI A) Cp. also *Hymn. codd. VPIIpOT*, p. 107 Bulst, vv. 1-2 *Deus, aeterni luminis / candor inenarrabilis*.

<sup>21</sup> Paulus Diaconus, p. 22 Neff, v. 77 *lux lucis* (K. Neff, *Die Gedichte des Paulus Diaconus*, München 1908); [Paulinus Nolanus] *App.*, p. 350 Hartel, v. 1 *lucis lumen*; *Hymni sec. regulas Caesarii et Aureliani dicendi*, p. 98 Bulst, v. 1, and *Hymni codd. VPIIpOT*, p. 106 Bulst, v. 5 *lucisque lumen*.

<sup>22</sup> Ambros. *Hymn.* 2.1-8 *splendor paternae gloriae, / de luce lucem proferens / lux lucis et fons luminis, / dies dierum inluminans, / uerusque sol inlabere, / micans nitore perpeti, / iubarque sancti spiritus / infunde nostris sensibus*. The same idea in Paulin. Aquil. XIII (*In sancti Marci euangeliste*), stanza 1.2-3, p. 157 Norberg *lux illa, patris quae lucet de solio, / quae fons, origo, splendor lucis aureae* (D. Norberg, *L'œuvre poétique de Paulin d'Aquilée. Édition critique avec introd. et comm.*, Stockholm 1979, 157-158. The hymn can also be found in G. M. Dreves, *Hymnographi Latini. Lateinische Hymnendichter des Mittelalters*, *Analecta Hymnica Medii Aevi* 50, Leipzig 1907, repr. Frankfurt 1961, 143-144).

<sup>23</sup> F. Cumont, *La théologie solaire du paganisme*, *Mém. de l'Acad. d'Inscr. et Belles Lettres*, Paris 1908.

<sup>24</sup> Macr. *Sat.* 1.17-23.

<sup>25</sup> See the texts quoted by Liver, *op. cit.*, 63.

A comparison between a text of Seneca, who lived in the I century A. D., and some Neoplatonists, who lived roughly 200 to 350 years later, will help us grasp the evolution of the idea.

In a passage in which the influence of Posidonius has been suggested<sup>26</sup> Seneca maintains that the human soul, though it descends earthwards to be united to the body, keeps its greater and better part in its heavenly abode, just as the sun lights up the earth, though it stays in the sky<sup>27</sup>. Almost three and a half centuries later another Roman writer, Macrobius, expressed a very similar idea with a phrasing clearly borrowed from Seneca: "as we are wont to affirm the presence on earth of the sun, whose beams come and go, so the soul's origin is heavenly, though it spends its temporary exile as a guest on this earth"<sup>28</sup>. Macrobius was familiar with Seneca's writings, as is shown by the lengthy passage about slavery which he copied from the earlier philosopher<sup>29</sup>, and his formal borrowings from him are evident in the text we are discussing: Macrobius' *solem in terris... cuius radius etc.* is clearly reminiscent of Seneca's *radii solis contingunt... terram*. Nevertheless the words of the two writers, though very similar, reflect a totally different view of the world.

In the time between Seneca and Macrobius the image of the sun lighting up the earth while staying in the sky had been appropriated by the Christians, as is shown by a passage of the dialogue *Octavius* by Minucius Felix, where its application is transferred from the human soul to God himself<sup>30</sup>; also—and even more important—it had been totally transformed in its import by the founders of Neoplatonism. Plotinus<sup>31</sup> maintains that light does not mix with the air that is lit up, so that it is right to say that the air is in the light,

<sup>26</sup> See W. Theiler, *Poseidonios, Die Fragmente. II. Erläuterungen*, Berlin-New York 1982, 249; 304; cp. 277; 319.

<sup>27</sup> Sen. *Ep.* 41.5 (*animus*) *maiore sui parte illic est unde descendit. Quemadmodum radii solis contingunt quidem terram sed ibi sunt unde mittuntur, sic animus magnus et sacer... conuersatur quidem nobiscum, sed haeret origini suae; illinc pendet, illuc spectat et nititur, nostris tamquam melior interest.* Cp. also *Ep.* 65.18; 102.22; *Ben.* 3.20.1.

<sup>28</sup> Macr. *In somn. Scip.* 1.21.34 *sicut solem in terris esse dicere solemus, cuius radius aduenit et recedit, ita animorum origo caelestis est, sed lege temporalis hospitalitatis hic exulat.*

<sup>29</sup> Sen. *Ep.* 47 ~ Macr. *Sat.* 1.11.7-15. Also Sen. *Ep.* 84.3-9 ~ Macr. *Sat.* 1 pr. 5-9.

<sup>30</sup> Min. Fel. *Oct.* 32.7-9: *ubique (Deus) non tantum nobis proximus, sed infusus est. 8. In solem adeo prorsus intende: caelo adfixus, sed terris omnibus sparsus est: pariter praesens ubique interest et miscetur omnibus, nusquam eius claritudo uiolatur. 9. Quanto magis Deus etc.*

<sup>31</sup> Plot. 4.3.22,1-12.

rather than the light in the air, just as, according to Plato<sup>32</sup>, it is correct to say that the body is in the soul, not the soul in the body. Plotinus' disciple, Porphyrius, mentions various sources of light, first and foremost the sun: "just like the sun, with its presence, turns air to light by making it light-like, so that the light is united to the air though at the same time remaining separate, in the same way the soul, though united to the body, stays totally separate"<sup>33</sup>.

So far the difference from Seneca's idea, though perceptible, is not dramatic. But Porphyrius goes immediately on to say that the analogy between the soul and the sun is far from complete, in view of the fact that the latter, like any other source of light, is material and locally tied to a certain place, whereas the soul and its light are unbounded, as becomes spiritual entities<sup>34</sup>.

The change from the monistic view of Stoicism to the duality of spirit versus matter endorsed by Neoplatonism has caused the pairing of the soul with the sun that falls under our senses to become a mere manner of speaking, a metaphor –no more an analogy based on real affinity, as it was in the case of Seneca and the Stoics. The soul belongs to a transcendent level of reality; the sun we can see is only its image, whereas its real kinship is to a reality beyond.

The so called *Chaldean Oracles*, a lost collection of oracles in verse attributed to one or the other of two theurgists, father and son, both named Julian, and sometimes to both of them, did conceive of a sun beyond the cosmos, as the model of the one we see<sup>35</sup>. Though only a few fragments have come down to us, the *Chaldean Oracles*, which originated around the turning from the II to the III century A. D., left a deep mark on the Neoplatonists of the following generations. The emperor Julian, a namesake of the authors of the *Chaldean Oracles*, took up the idea of a transcendent sun

<sup>32</sup> Plato *Tim.* 34B; 36DC.

<sup>33</sup> Porph. *ap.* Nemes. *De nat. hom.* 3, p. 40.22-41.2 Morani (fr. 261F Smith) ὡς γὰρ ὁ ἥλιος τῆ παρουσία τὸν ἀέρα εἰς φῶς μεταβάλλει ποιῶν αὐτὸν φωτοειδῆ, καὶ ἐνοῦται τῷ ἀέρι τὸ φῶς ἀσυγχύτως ἅμα καὶ αὐτῷ κεχυμένον, τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ ἐνουμένη τῷ σώματι μένει πάντως ἀσύγχυτος.

<sup>34</sup> Porph. *ibid.* p. 42.3-8 ὁ μὲν ἥλιος σῶμα ὢν καὶ τόπω περιγραφόμενος οὐκ ἔστι πανταχοῦ, ἔνθα καὶ τὸ φῶς αὐτοῦ, ὡς οὐδὲ τὸ πῦρ μένει γὰρ καὶ αὐτὸ ἐν τοῖς ξύλοις ἢ ἐν θρυαλλίδι δεδεμένον ὡς ἐν τόπω. ἡ δὲ ψυχὴ, ἀσώματος οὔσα καὶ μὴ περιγραφομένη τόπω, ὅλη δι' ὅλου χωρεῖ, καὶ οὐκ ἔστι μέρος φωτιζόμενον ὑπ' αὐτῆς, ἐν ᾧ μὴ ὅλη πάρεστιν.

<sup>35</sup> Cp. H. Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy. Mysticism Magic and Platonism in the Late Roman Empire*, Paris 1978<sup>2</sup>, 151-152.



in his speech *To the Sun king* (εἰς τὸν Ἥλιον βασιλέα)<sup>36</sup>, which is another important document of the solar theology I have mentioned before.

The important point, however, is that now God as well as the human soul are thought of as totally detached and even opposed to the reality which can be grasped through the senses. It is quite apt, therefore, that in the hymn by Ambrose I mentioned before, the expression *lux lucis et fons luminis* ("light of light and fountainhead of glow") should be followed by the invocation *uerusque sol, inlabere* ("and, o true sun, approach")<sup>37</sup>. These words amount to a recognition of the fact that God can be equated to our sensible sun only by way of a lame and inadequate metaphor. In reality he is himself the real sun, beyond and above the one we can see.

The mention of the great light of the sky, now seen as a symbol and a token of the much greater preternatural light of heaven, brings us back to the distinction I established at the beginning of this paper.

I hinted at the other meaning of light as a symbol of the glow of the eternal life awaiting the souls of the righteous after death; and the abode of the blessed is often related to the heavens, near God himself, witness the English expression "to go to heaven", still used to this day.

In ancient Greece the abode of the gods is conceived of as steeped in perpetual light ever since the earliest times. Here is Homer's description in the *Odyssey*: "it is not shaken by the winds nor drenched by rain; snow does not fall, but a bright and clear sky spreads above and a gleaming glow unfolds over it"<sup>38</sup>. Later an abode in eternal light beyond the grave was promised to those who had been initiated in the cults related to mysteries of one kind or another, as we know from the lively descriptions in Pindar's second *Olympic Ode* as well as some of his fragments<sup>39</sup>, and also in Aristophanes' *Frogs*<sup>40</sup>. Vergil's Elysian Fields are lit up by their own sun and stars and are steeped in a light brighter than that of our world<sup>41</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> Iulian. 11 (*Ad Solem regem*), 28, 148A. See A. Setaioli, *La vicenda dell'anima nel commento di Servio a Virgilio*, Frankfurt 1995, 77 and *passim*.

<sup>37</sup> Ambros. *Hymn.* 2.5 (see above, note 22).

<sup>38</sup> Hom. *Od.* 6.43-45 οὐτ' ἀνέμοισι τινάσσεται οὔτε ποτ' ὄμβρω / δεύεται οὔτε χιῶν ἐπιπίλναται, ἀλλὰ μάλ' αἴθρη / πέπταται ἀνέφελος, λευκὴ δ' ἐπιδέδρομεν αἴγλη.

<sup>39</sup> Pind. *Ol.* 2.56 ff.; *fr.* 129. For details see A. Setaioli, "Pindaro", *Enciclopedia Virgiliana*, IV (1988) 107-111, esp. 108-109 (also for parallels with Vergil).

<sup>40</sup> Aristoph. *Ran.* 454 ff.

<sup>41</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 6.640-641 *largior hic campos aether et lumine uestit / purpureo, solemque suum, sua sidera norunt.*

Here again the formal influence of pagan literary tradition has left a deep mark on Christian prayers. Even as late as Charlemagne's times an unmistakably Vergilian echo can be detected in a prayer by Paulinus of Aquileia, when he says that God orders the sun "to dress" the earth with its light<sup>42</sup>, employing the same image and the same verb (*uestire*) used by Vergil in his description of Elysium.

The influence of pagan literary tradition is even more clearly recognizable in a passage by Ambrose which does not belong to a prayer, but to the treatise *De bono mortis* ("On the benefit of death"). Here the bishop clearly develops Homer's description of the dwelling of the gods: "we shall go... where there are no clouds, no thunderbolts, no lightnings, no windstorms, nor darkness or evening, summer or winter will change the weather, no cold, no hail, no rains". But then he immediately goes on to say: "there will be no need of this sun or the moon and there will be no stars: just the glow of God will shine. For the Lord shall be everybody's light and the true glow, that enlightens every man, will shine for all"<sup>43</sup>. This transcendent conclusion certainly does not come as a surprise from the author of the prayer mentioned before, where God is addressed as the real sun, as opposed to the one we can see; but again it must draw our attention to the transformation worked on traditional images and ideas by their adaptation to the transcendent vision of Neoplatonism and Christianity.

Here again a comparison with Seneca will help us appreciate the full import of this transformation. In his *Consolation* for Marcia, who had lost a son, Seneca describes the abode of the blessed as steeped in eternal light, as opposed to the darkness symbolizing earthly life<sup>44</sup>. This theme appears

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<sup>42</sup> Paulin. Aquil. XVI (*Oratio pro aeris temperie. Carmen Sancti Paulini ad pluuiam postulandam*) stanza 2.1-2, p. 163 Norberg *solem tu iubet oriri splendifluum, / latum uestire mandas orbem radio*. The prayer can also be found in Dreves, *op. cit.*, 146-147, and Liver, *op. cit.*, 402-403.

<sup>43</sup> Ambros. *De bono mort.* 12.53 *ibimus eo... ubi nullae nubes, nulla tonitrua, nullae coruscationes, nulla uentorum procella, neque tenebrae, neque uesper, neque aestas, neque hiems uices uariabunt temporum, non frigus, non grandis, non pluuiae; non solis istius erit usus aut lunae neque stellarum globi, sed sola Dei fulgebit claritas. Dominus enim erit lux omnium et illud lumen uerum, quod inluminat omnem hominem, fulgebit omnibus.*

<sup>44</sup> Sen. *Ad Marc.* 25.2 *noua luce gaudentem*; 26.3 *uidemusque non alta nocte circumdati*; cp. 24.5 *haec quae uides... uincula animorum tenebraeque sunt*. For Seneca's vision of afterlife see A. Setaioli, "Seneca e l'oltretomba", *Paideia* 52 (1997) 321-367, now in A. Setaioli, *Facundus Seneca. Aspetti della lingua e dell'ideologia senecana*, Bologna 2000, 275-323.

in several other passages of Seneca's works<sup>45</sup>. But it is always quite clear that this light comes from a natural source: it is one and the same with the glow of the heavenly bodies among which the souls of the righteous have risen after death. "Just imagine," says Seneca to his friend Lucilius, "how great will be the glow of so many stars mixing their light"<sup>46</sup>. True, the image of the light of heaven coming from the globes of the stars is not unknown to Christian prayer and is found as late as the XI century in the hymn by Petrus Damiani in honor of St. Benedict, where the latter and his sister Scholastica are depicted while ascending to heaven amid the glow of the stars<sup>47</sup>; but by now we know that both the Christians and the Neoplatonists conceived of heavenly light as totally detached from any natural source: it was completely transcendent; it was Plotinus' νοητὸν φῶς and Dante's *luce intellettuale*.

Obviously this light cannot be pinpointed to any particular place in the physical universe, made up by the earth and the several heavens surrounding it, according to the conception of the ancients. But ever since Plato had placed his ideas in the ὑπερουράνιος τόπος, that is in a place above and beyond the heavens, that space had been conceived of not as a physical, but, so to speak, as an intellectual place. It was only natural that it should be chosen as the seat of God's transcendent light. According to Basilios the blessed will receive their reward "in the light above the cosmos."<sup>48</sup> By that time, though Basilios does not mention it, this place had already received the name that was bound to stick for centuries, in the *Chaldean Oracles* mentioned before, as is testified by a fragment of Porphyrius quoted by Augustine in his *City of God*<sup>49</sup>: it was called the Empyrean (in Greek ἐμπύριον, "the fiery place") – a name itself associated with the idea of fire and light.

The Christians had no qualms in taking it up and making it the seat of their Heaven, without even changing the name. True, the idea was some-

<sup>45</sup> E. g. *Ep.* 79.2; 102.28; etc.

<sup>46</sup> *Sen. Ep.* 102.28; cp. *Ad Marc.* 25.2.

<sup>47</sup> Petr. Damian. *Hymn. Sancti Benedicti ad Vesperum* (M. Lokrantz, *L'opera poetica di S. Pier Damiani*, Stockholm 1964, 67-68; also in G. M. Dreves, *Hymnogr. Lat.*, Anal. Hymn. Med. Aev. 48, Leipzig 1905, repr. Frankfurt 1961, 41-42, and Liver, *op. cit.*, 403-404) stanzas 5-6 *iure sub blandae specie columbae / nesciam fellis animam sororis / summa stellati penetrare caeli / culmina cernis. / Ipse post clarum referens triumphum / celsa deuicto petis astra mundo. / Luce flammantem radiante callem / pallia sternunt.*

<sup>48</sup> Basil. *Hexaem.* 2.5, 41A ἐν τῷ ὑπερκοσμίῳ φωτί.

<sup>49</sup> Porph. *De regr. animae* fr. 287F., p. 324.2 Smith *empyrias mundi sublimitates*. See also the texts quoted by Smith, p. 325.

what too subtle and philosophical to find great use in prayers meant for common people and the ordinary service. The *Requiem aeternam* I quoted at the beginning of this paper does not elaborate on where the "eternal light", the *lux perpetua*, must exactly be placed, though the epithet does seem to imply that the reference cannot be to the natural light of the stars comprising the cosmos – which is doomed to vanish at the end of times. But the Em-pyrean found a worthy celebration in a famous text that can be considered both a great prayer and one of the most valuable legacies from Italy to the world: the last cantos of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.