

## **Unification with God as a mystical state accomplished by the intertwining of virtues**

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### **Summary:**

The study explores and explains how to unite the soul with God, embodying, through the intertwining of the mystical teaching found in Mystagogy of Maximus the Confessor on the union of virtues in the soul of the ascetic, with the mode the neural centers are co-working on the different neuro-physiological functions described by the new discoveries of the neuroscience, the relevance, the similarity and the mutual confirmation of the old patristic mystagogic teachings with the new neurophysiological sciences that reveals more and more of the mysteries of the human brain and the psyche. The study is a demonstration of the validity of neurotheology as a science, demonstrating the confirmation of functional models described by the mystagogical teaching of the Church by the discoveries of neurophysiological sciences.

### **Keywords:**

Maximus the Confessor, Mystagogy, Neurotheology, Virtues, Brain, Unity with God.

For those who do not know anything about neurotheology, although this is now considered an old (more than 15 years old) domain of scientific research, we will briefly resume its realm, scope and intention, as regarding the application of neurophysiology to the special functions and manifestations of the human brain in mystical state of meditation, prayer, contemplation and ecstasy. We will utilize and give reference about some of the famous titles from this domain of research in the footnotes of this study.

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In this special study we are trying to bring under attention the striking similarity between some largely accepted conclusions and data in neurophysiology and some aspects and conclusions of mystical theology of the great saint and theologian of the seventh century, Maxim the Confessor, as they appear in his *Mystagogy*.

More exactly, it is the sublime teaching of Saint Maxim the Confessor about how and in what way, again, the Church icon and image of the soul itself is exposed in the fifth chapter of his *Mystagogy*, which, it seems to us, is obviously confirmed by the neurophysiologic theory about the repartition of the specific functions of the brain into its two hemispheres. Saint Maxim was inspired in his teaching, as he affirmed, by “a great and wise old man in the divine things regarding the Holy Church and the Sacred Liturgy committed in it”. He himself admitted to the great mystical qualities of this old and wise man, and his reduced capacities to completely expose his sublime teaching:

“I confess that I will not tell about all the teachings mysteriously revealed by that old man, not even about the exposed things, as they were understood and shown by him. For he was not only a philosopher and teacher of all wisdom; but through the richness of his virtue and through his long and skillful pains in the divine problems, he had liberated himself from the chains and idols of matter. As a result he *was enlightened in his spirit* by the divine rays and, therefore able to see immediately what common people could not see. Moreover his reason was capable to explain all the things revealed in spirit accurately, being unhindered by any stain of passions, just like a mirror, and therefore able to bear and speak without stutter about the things which can not be understood by others.”<sup>1</sup>

As we can see, the enigmatic wise old man whose wisdom Saint Maxim inherits, was a true gifted religious man with real mystical qualities, a man “*enlightened in his spirit*” by the grace of the Holy Spirit manifested in his soul in the form of “divine rays” giving him the power of contemplation (*theoria*) of things unseen by most people. His soul, explained through a platonic metaphor, was like a mirror, but he also had very powerful reason, a power – gained through exercise – expressed in his rational capacity to expose the contemplated things in visions and to pursue the dialectic connections between them, and thus to make his contemplations understood to his disciples, one of them being Saint Maxim himself.

Furthermore, Saint Maxim affirms the power of this spiritual old man to convey to his interlocutors “the vision of all the meanings brought by words” this way, that is mediated by words, “all the spiritual things revealing themselves clearly and in all their meaning” to the receivers of his teachings. The implications here are

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<sup>1</sup> Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, „Introduction”, în: Sf. Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Mystagogia, cosmosul și sufletul, chipuri ale Bisericii*, introduction, translation and notes by Pr. Prof. Dr. D. Stăniloae, p. 5.

more profound than what we can understand through the superior notion and power of the human spirit intuition; there is also a sort of spiritual power to connect, through speech, the auditory to the source of meaning and knowledge hidden and then revealed in the profundity of the contemplated things, even if his interlocutors did not have such power before, a power to communicate in a more complex and rich language; this means contemplation. And it is this spiritual power – whose origin and genesis in the soul is explained by the great synthesis made by Saint Maxim in the fifth chapter of his *Mystagogy* – in fact the genesis or even the anatomy of this spiritual power ascribed to his master, that is being detailed here.

What the elder man is exactly teaching us through Saint Maxim the Confessor, is actually an interesting hierarchy of the two main spiritual powers of man: the spirit, or the mind (*nous*), and the reason, or the discursive faculty of the soul (*logos* including, also what the Greeks understood by *dianoia*), in which originate two lines of virtues which must interweave with each other in order to achieve the great inner spiritual unity of our soul. For the sake of clarity I will quote specifically Saint Maxim's resumed text presenting the development of these virtues, given by him at the end of the fifth chapter of his *Mystagogy*: „Therefore, these are, as I said, proper to our soul; through the mind it virtually has wisdom, from wisdom derives meditation, and from this, knowledge, from knowledge the unforgettable knowledge, and through all these the soul is led to the Truth, which is the limit and the final purpose of spiritual goods. And through reason it has prudence, from which comes action, from action, virtue, from this belief, through which the soul rests in Good as the blissful purpose and end of rational works. Finally, through the unification of these altogether, the science of divine things can be collected.”<sup>2</sup>

The unification of all the spiritual virtues and powers of man – described here as being disposed into two parallel chains or poles of a ladder which lifts and opens the soul to the contemplation of the divine realm – must be accomplished, if we wish to effectively accomplish this ladder inside our soul, establishing the necessary links between the equivalent virtues from each chain as the rungs of the ladder. Saint Maxim says that “he will not explain here how exactly and in what way prudence is the power of reason, action is its habit and virtue is its work, or how and in what way wisdom is the power of the mind, contemplation, its habit and knowledge, its work (*energeia*), etc”, referring to the inner relation of each part or function of the soul with the virtues derived from it. He emphasizes, though, that “the important thing is to know that each soul, when it becomes able, by the grace of the Holy Spirit and through its own effort and tenacity, [must] bring together and interweave all of these together, that is reason with mind, prudence with wisdom, action with contemplation, virtue with knowledge, and

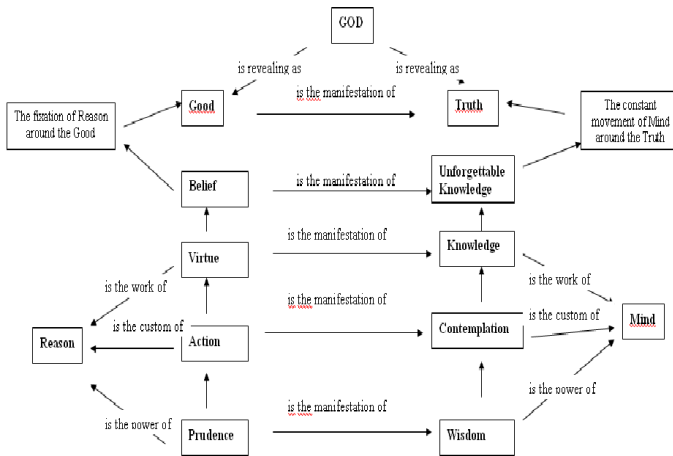
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<sup>2</sup> Saint Maxim the Confessor, *Mystagogy*, chap. V, p. 14.

belief with unforgettable knowledge, without minimizing or exaggerating none in relation to other, taking away from them any inflammation or lack; when it becomes able, to say it in brief, to make from its decade a monad, then it will be united with God, the true and good one, the one and the only. It will then become beautiful and magnificent, and like Him – as much as it is possible – by the accomplishment of the four general virtues, which show the divine decade of the soul, and embrace the other happy decade of commandments.”<sup>3</sup>

What is important and what Saint Maxim wishes to illustrate is the way in which the soul achieves the inner mystical unity of its spiritual powers, and the way in which it becomes like or it resembles the holy church spiritually: “In all these the soul resembles the holy church, viewed in a spiritual way. All those that have been shown as related to the mind and gradually emerging from it are indicated by the church through hieration. And those that have been shown as being related to reason and emerging from it through development are illustrated in the nave. Finally, all of them are gathered together by the church in the mystery fulfilled on the divine altar; through this mystery everyone who can wisely understand everything that is accomplished in the church will indeed build his own true church of God and divinely transform his soul.”<sup>4</sup>

The complex interrelation and interweaving of the spiritual powers and virtues of the soul described above, resuming the teaching inherited by Saint Maxim from the old wise man, can be presented schematically in a chart as follows,



<sup>3</sup> Saint Maxim the Confessor, *Mystagogy*, chap. V, p. 12-13.

<sup>4</sup> Saint Maxim the Confessor, *Mystagogy*, chap. V, p. 14.

the inner unification movements of the soul among its virtues accomplishing, as we will try to demonstrate, the inner liturgy of the mind on the altar of the heart<sup>5</sup> – as it is named in the philocalic spirituality, the heart being understood not as the kardia, but as in the semitic spirituality, “the integrative center of the intellectual and affective activity of the soul”.<sup>6</sup>

*Logos* is the greek term used by Saint Maxim to name and to explain the function of what we are understanding today through reason as discursive and linear way of thinking, and *nous* is the similar greek term used to nominate what we understood through mind as intuitive and holistic way of apprehending the information. And these terms are used also not only in his *Mystagogy* where he presents this architecture of the virtues, but also in *Questiones ad Thalasius*, where we find very interesting explanations and details about these two parts or expressions of the human spirit in connection with the same virtues of the knowledge and belief.

However, the hierarchy of virtues described above and their arrangement, derivation and interrelationship, will appear strikingly similar to the repartition of cognitive and affective functions of the human soul on the two hemisphere of the brain for anyone who has some elementary notion of neurophysiology.

The repartition and specialization of different kinds of neurofunctional formations in the human brain determine, as it is pointed out in neurophysiology studies, the bipolar function of the unique human brain as if there would be, effectively, two brains, the right and the left hemispheres, each manifesting dissimilar and particular functions, this way influencing the psychological temperament of each person. The specific mode in which someone experiences the world and apprehends teachings is fundamentally influenced by which hemisphere of the brain is dominant in giving his specific answer to the confronted situation. Although the activity of the brain is divided between them, the two hemispheres interrelate and communicate with each other, this way the specific functions and capacities of the soul being brought together into a comprehensive whole, whose action depends on the way in which these hemispheres contribute, supplement and co-operate with each other.

Furthermore, it results that there is a close relationship between the brain hemisphericity and the thinking styles of people; the predominance of one of the

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Marcu Ascetul, *Despre Botez*, FR I, p. 292. (Mark the Anchorite, *About Baptism*)

<sup>6</sup> Antoine Guillaumont, „Cor et cordis affectus”, in: *DSp* 2, 2282 and 2385, also Brock, Sebastian, „The Prayer of the Heart in Syriac Tradition”, in: *Sobornost. Eastern Churches Review* 4 (2/1982), p. 131-142

two hemispheres or, within them, of some neurofunctional formations, gives birth to the multitude of spiritual profiles to be discovered within the human race.

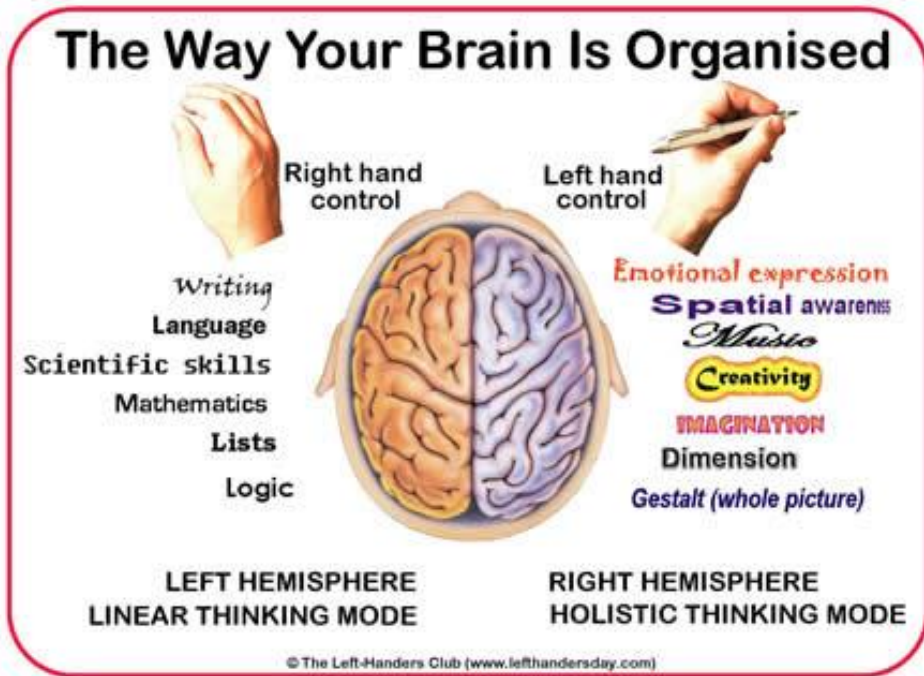
The neurophysiologic studies also reveal that the left hemisphere of the brain is usually, with the majority of people, the dominant one, where language and speech are produced, being concerned with logical and analytic skills and processing the stimuli in a rational, sequential mode. The subjects with a dominant left hemisphere of the brain are rational and methodical, concerned with things as they are, in a realistic mode; they communicate well by means of words, and have highly developed verbal abilities, being able to express verbal descriptions; they make use of motor skills more effectively, utilize a more analytical approach to solving problems, do not like change, being non-creative in planning and organization, typically have problems seeing the big picture; in return they deal more easily with word choice, rules of grammar, and the meaning of words, and are usually unemotional in their approach to human relations.

We can conclude from this brief description that the left hemisphere of the brain is appropriate to what we usually understand by reason, by the analytic, logical, conceptual, discursive, linear and punctual way of thinking and approaching reality.

Opposing and completing it, the right hemisphere of the brain *is the initial receiver of incoming information*, and the center for visual, rhythm, "artistic" or "creative" abilities. In processing stimuli this side of the brain uses a global process in perceiving, assimilating, and processing data. The subjects with a right hemisphere dominance communicate using images (pictures), have highly developed spatial abilities, are intuitive and imaginative, concerned with emotions and feelings; they can express themselves non-verbally by selecting the matching stimulus, apparently determine the emotional content of speech; usually they want simple answers to complex problems, tending not to follow through with details, and not to follow procedures – they like to do things their way; they prefer to think more holistically, are more spatially-oriented and creative in solving problems, reaching the fittest result through intuition, and so manifesting the spiritual power of creativity in sublime realms like art, poetry and music.

From this description of the right hemisphere of the brain we can appreciate it like the one which cares for approaching information in a very multifaceted way, full of meanings and nuances, in a complex and emotional mode, the knowledge given being used and processed by the left hemisphere in order to express reality verbally.

In a very synthetic image, (found on the internet at <http://www.lefthandersday.com/> ), the characteristics of the cognitive functions distributed on the two hemispheres of the brain look like this:



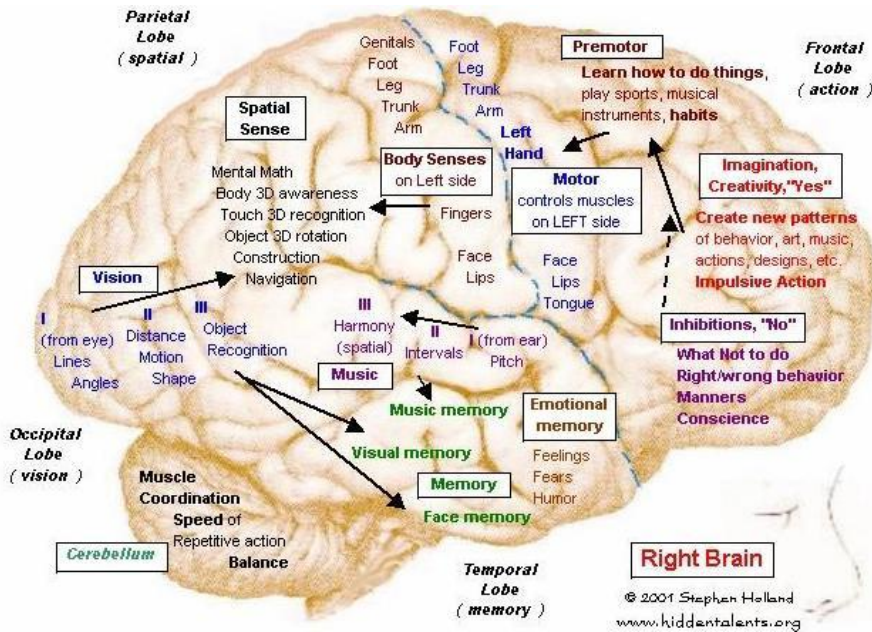
We will be using this image and the others following below to emphasize more intuitively the similarity found between mysticism and neurophysiology.

Moreover, neurophysiological studies affirm that there exist specific neurofunctional formations, as for example Wernicke and Broca's areas in the left hemisphere, dealing with the speaking and auditory association functions, and also, as interrelated manifestations of these neurofunctional formations, the so-called *cognitive operators* also disposed on the hemispheres and in other inner structures of the brain in a way that confirms this specialization of the two hemispheres as well as the spiritual functions described in the religious texts like that from Saint Maxim's Mystagogy. Thus, resuming these studies, in the left hemisphere of the brain, which has been studied more extensively, there are: the *reductionist operator* in the parietal lobule, the *causal operator* in the left frontal lobe connected with the left orientation and association area, the *abstractive operator* as well as the *quantitative operator* in the inferior part of the left parietal lobule. The *holistic operator* is situated in the right parietal lobe being connected

with the right orientation and association area, and also with the *emotional value operator* and the *existential operator* located in the limbic system.<sup>7</sup>

Although we can not make a close and exact identification between the virtues from the Saint Maxim's scheme and the cognitive operators and the functional neuroformations from the neurothology, practically each system is affirming the same thing. And in the same way we cannot say that the *unforgettable knowledge* is given by the activity of hippocampus – the principal part of the brain carrying with memory, because the long term memory is stored everywhere in the cerebral neocortex in different specialized places for commanding the skills or exerting others virtues.

We have found a more complete, intuitive and clear repartition of these and other cognitive operators (briefly presented here) in the following two maps of the brain hemispheres presented below, through the generosity of Mr. Stephen Holland, for a more comprehensive understanding of the subject.

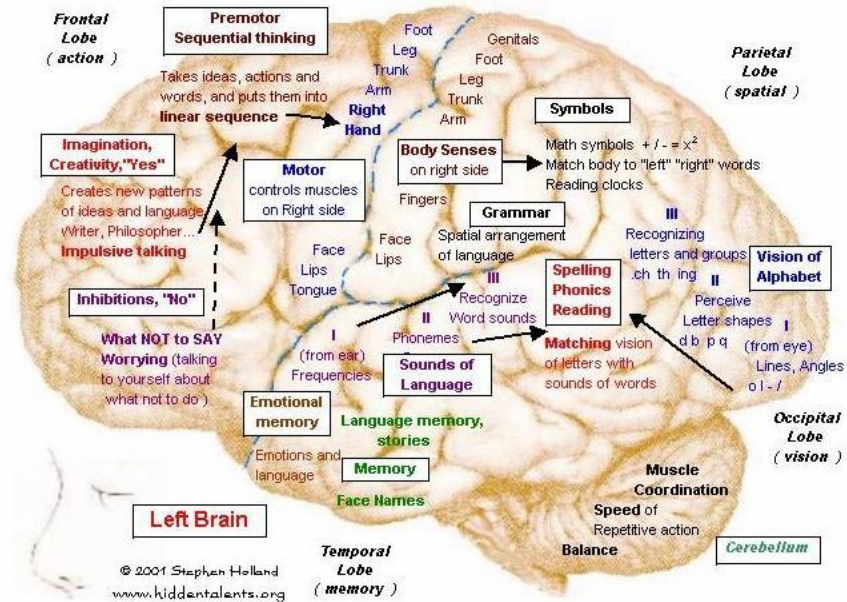


<http://www.spsu.edu/htc/bseabolt/3000/brain/rightbrain.jpg>

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Newberg, Eugene D'Aquili, *Why God Won't Go Away*, Ballantines Books, New York, 2002, p. 40-53, and also their book *The Mystical Mind, Probing the Biology of Religious Experience*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1999, p. 50-61.



Unification with God as a mystical state



<http://www.spsu.edu/htc/bseabolt/3000/brain/leftbrain.jpg>

The scope of our paper does not need further description of the specific functions and activities of these cognitive operators, as the specific repartition and specialization of the two hemispheres of the brain have already resulted very clearly from this description, the left one as analytic, rational and discursive, and the right one as cognitive, intuitive and emotional. This fact is also confirmed in many other reference books, as for example the famous bestseller *Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman, from which we provide this large quotation:

*"In a very real sense we have two minds, one that thinks and one that feels. These two fundamentally different ways of knowing interact to construct our mental life. One, the rational mind, is the mode of comprehension we are typically conscious of more prominent in awareness, thoughtful, able to ponder and reflect. But alongside that there is another system of knowing: impulsive and powerful, if sometimes illogical — the emotional mind. ... There is a steady gradient in the ratio of rational-to-emotional control over the mind; the more intense the feeling, the more dominant the emotional mind becomes — and the more ineffectual the rational...."*

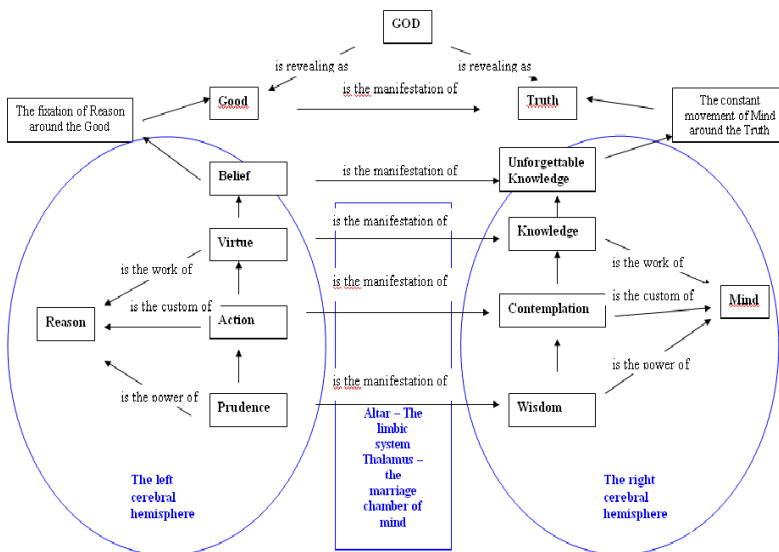
*These two minds, the emotional and the rational operate in tight harmony for the most part, intertwining their very different ways of knowing to guide us through the world. Ordinarily there is a balance between emotional and rational minds, with emotion feeding into and informing the operations of the rational*

mind, and the rational mind refining and sometimes vetoing the inputs of the emotions. Still, the emotional and rational minds are semi-independent faculties, each ... reflecting the operation of distinct, but interconnected circuitry in the brain.

*In many or most moments these minds are exquisitely coordinated; feelings are essential to thought, thought to feeling. But when passions surge the balance tips: it is the emotional mind that captures the upper hand, swamping the rational mind.*<sup>8</sup>

This repartition of the functions of the brain on its hemispheres shows an obvious similarity with the pattern affirmed by the old wise man from the Mystagogy of the Saint Maxim the Confessor, and that affirmed by modern neurophysiology, each of them conceiving a rational part of the brain concerned with analyses from which derive acceptance and belief in the special situations, conceptions or persons encountered in life, and a cognitive-emotional one concerned with the approach and apprehension of the variety of information and images of the world through which knowledge is accumulated.

Thus, we can complete the first flow chart presented above with the central rectangular square as a symbol of the limbic system and thalamus – which leads to the integration and the synthesis between both hemispheres of the brain - placed in advance between the rounds around symbolizing the two hemispheres of the brain.



<sup>8</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, New York: Bantam Books, 1994, p. 8-9.

The limbic system in the center of the brain is defined in the neurotheological studies as “the transmitter to God”<sup>9</sup> and through its formations (hippocampus, hypothalamus and amygdale), in connection with the thalamus and the cerebral surface, achieves the integration of the interior and the exterior life of the subject. Or, the exact translation of the word thalamus is “chamber of marriage”, this metaphor being widely spread in the philocalic literature, which also includes the Mystagogy of Saint Maxim, its synonymous similar expression being *thamieios tes nous*, expressing what these mystical texts also name the organ or the spiritual place where the soul encounters God through the “sense of mind or of heart” or the “sense of soul”. The position of this spiritual sense in the middle of the brain is affirmed also in the classical philosophic and patristic texts, as for example Aristotle’s *On the youth and old age*, where, in chapter 1, we can read: „Since then the organs of special sensations have one common organ in which the senses, when functioning, must meet, and this must be situated midway between what is called before and behind (we call 'before' the direction from which sensation comes, 'behind' the opposite); further, since in all living things the body is divided into upper and lower (they all have upper and lower parts, so that this is true of plants as well), clearly the nutritive principle must be situated midway between these regions.” Or, in chapter 3: „Certainly, however, all sanguineous animals have the supreme organ of the sense faculties in the heart, for it is here that we must look for the common sensorium belonging to all the sense-organs. These in two cases, taste and touch, can be clearly seen to extend to the heart, and hence the others also must lead to it, for in it the other organs may possibly initiate changes, whereas with the upper region of the body taste and touch have no connection. Apart from these considerations, if life is always located in this part, evidently the principle of sensation must be situated there too, for it is qua animal that an animal is said to be a living thing, and it is called animal because endowed with sensation. Elsewhere, in other works, we have stated the reasons why some of the sense-organs are, as is evident, connected with the heart, while others are situated in the head. (It is this fact that causes some people to think that it is in virtue of the brain that the function of perception belongs to animals).”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Rhawn Joseph, *The transmitter to God, the limbic system, the soul and spirituality*, University Press California, San Jose, California, 2001, 289 p.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *On Youth and Old Age, On Life and Death, On Breathing*, translated by G. R. T. Ross, chap. 1 and 3. Although the center which Aristotle is referring to in these texts is not that of the brain, but the middle part of any animated creature, his reference is also important to us because it sustains the central position of the sense of the soul with which we are dealing here.

The same inner sense of the soul is also approached by Lactance, referring to its natural and original state as regarding the communion with God and to its actual deviated state: "the collapse of people from Edenic happiness ... is due to the deviance from the contemplation of heaven, that means from the worship of God, and, in the same time, is due to the slavery of the heavenly sense to the body. The place of this heavenly sense, of this reason torn from the transcendent and searching for the transcendent, is in the soul, the only vessel communicating with divinity."<sup>11</sup>

Saint Augustine also clearly affirm the antique conception regarding an organ "common sensorium" unifying the senses that can be indisputably identified with "the chamber of marriage of the soul" (τὰμειος τς νοῦς - θαλαμος) situated in the middle of the brain. He declares, wondering at the creative power of God: "He, from a point situated somehow in the brain center, sends the five senses, He, Who distributes vital movements in all the parts of the body, through the heart, such a small limb...",<sup>12</sup>

The spiritual function of this chamber of marriage of the soul is also talked about in his Confessions, and here is an interesting quotation, although, as I mentioned before, the philocalic and himnographic texts are full of references expressing this spiritual metaphor: "And not in all these things, which I go through asking You, do I find a safe place for my soul as in You, in which all my scattered feelings should gather and nothing should ever leave me. And sometimes You introduce me into a quite unusual feeling, in a kind of sweetness, which, if it were accomplished in me would be something that I do not know, something that would not be from this life. But I fall again and I am held by them and cry ..."<sup>13</sup>

This chamber of marriage is the „inner shrine of the soul”, or the „treasure of the physis”, the Greek word *tamieios* having in the ancient world, as similar senses, also, this one, as I also explained in another study<sup>14</sup>.

The reference to this chamber of marriage, or the „inner shrine of the soul”, completes the description of the anatomy of the mystic and ecstatic religious experience supposed by Saint Maxim the Confessor in the fifth chapter of his *Mystagogy* – an experience which we do not intend to explain here because the

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<sup>11</sup> Lactanțiu, *Divinae Institutiones*, CSEL 19, Pars I, ed. Samuel Brandt, Prague, Vienna, Leipzig, 1890, VI, 1, 7-10.

<sup>12</sup> Saint Augustine, *Epistola 137. 11, 8*, CSEL 44, pars. III, 1904, ed. Al. Goldbacher p. 106-107.

<sup>13</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessiones C a X-a, XL, 65*, in: PSB 64, p. 238-239.

<sup>14</sup> Bîrzu Vasile, "L'anthropologie athropomorphique comme fondement d'une neurotheology reele chez Diadoque", study sustained in: "Approches transdisciplinaire au dialogue entre science, art et religion dans l'Europe de demain", Sibiu 9-11 Septembre 2007.

exact description and references to this ecstatic experience are presented by him in his *Mystagogy*, but in some texts from his work *Ambigua*. The thalamus symbolized through the metaphor „chamber of marriage” of the soul from the philocalic spirituality, is in fact the altar table from the inner hieration of the soul, on which we bring together both the results of mind and reason, or of the right brain hemisphere and of the left brain hemisphere. Nevertheless, even though the thalamus is the formation giving more the sentiment of belief, we cannot say that the *belief* is the activity of this cerebral neurofomation or of other cognitive operator, but the result of a complex synthesis made between all the parts of the brain implicated from case to case in composing that thought.

What we are interested in here is to explain how the neurofunctional structures of intuitive knowledge (right hemisphere) and spiritual belief (left one) presented until now are understood by the studies of neurophysiology and neurotheology, and how this understanding fits that one of Saint Maximus’ *Mystagogy*, in an attempt to give modern neurotheology a real patristic and philocalic content, and the mystical teachings from Saint Maxim’s *Mystagogy* a scientific and logical understanding. By doing this, in fact, we try to explain one through the other, how each of the two hemispheres and spiritual functions of the brain work, in accomplishing the inner state of the soul’s unity specific to the mystical and sacramental communion with God.

In fact we will try to reread Saint Maxim’s texts, identifying and replacing the equivalent terms of the two systems, in our effort to elucidate the physiology of his spirituality, and to bring arguments from his spirituality regarding the character – both real and transcendental – of the ecstatic experiences reported by neurophysiology - neurotheology.

We have found as very suggestive, for our purpose here, the quotation which we reproduce below *in extenso*, from the book by Mr. Joseph Giovannoli, *The Biology of Belief*. It explains the close interrelationship between knowledge and belief, intuition and reason, in the human approach and analysis of reality intermediated by the two hemispheres of the brain:

*“Much of our information about the world is confusing and imprecise. Although we use reason to deal with much of it, we rely on intuition to deal with questions for which answers are otherwise unavailable. Consequently, it would be valuable to know what intuition is and how it works.*

*Among other things, our brains are neural networks that can find patterns in large volumes of imprecise information. Pattern recognition takes place without our conscious awareness. When our minds find what might be a pattern, we perceive it as sensing something—an intuition, idea, feeling, impression, suspicion, hunch, insight, and so on. It is a pattern recognition process, not a reasoning process. Unlike reasoning, intuition does not allow us to trace back to*

*determine why our mind made a particular linkage. Intuitions are unconscious conclusions without conscious reasons. Research on humans and other mammals suggests that intuition employs the neural networks of our brains in the following (simplified) process.*"<sup>15</sup>

The same thing is also affirmed by Saint Maxim, explaining how the Holy Church, by this also understanding the inner Church of the soul, is "an image and icon of God, as one which has the same work as Him, through imitation (through the left hemisphere) and imagination (through the right hemisphere)"; it unifies both the intelligible and the sensitive cosmos through its ability to deal with these patterns, named by Saint Maxim "the symbolic forms" and "meanings".

We will expose below a suggestive quotation in this regard from Saint Maxim's *Mystagogy*, also mentioning the equivalent and explanatory terms from neurotheology (in brackets):

"For, the entire intelligible cosmos is comprehensible throughout the sensitive cosmos, in a mystical way, through the symbolic forms (that means through the right hemisphere of the brain), to those who can see; and all the sensible one exists in the intelligible one, simplified in the meanings of the mind (that means through the work accomplished by the left hemisphere). In that one there exists this one, through meanings, and in this one, that one, through figures."<sup>16</sup>

The brain, with its specialized hemispheres, is the proper tool to comprehend and to keep in unity the Universe, conceived of both rational and sensible things from the beginning, and it can only do its job through the integration of its two distinct powers found in the two hemispheres; because the parts of the cosmos are intermingled in a spiritual way, exactly through God's power, and man can participate to this care of God for His creation, unifying the cosmos through the powers of his own soul. The image used by Saint Maxim to present in a very suggestive way this intermingling of the intelligible and material parts of the cosmos, is that of the merkhaba throne which he was referring by the tetrad of virtues, as we, already, have quoted above, and, also he very briefly alludes to:

"And their work is one, like "a wheel inside a wheel" as the wonderful seer of great things, Ezekiel, says, talking, I believe, about the two worlds (Ez. 1, 16)."<sup>17</sup>

And we can understand from this that the human soul as well, through its two parts, the reason and the mind, must become the merkhaba throne, must restore the image of God in it, in order to accomplish this task, participating in this way exactly to the God's care for His creation.

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<sup>15</sup> Joseph Giovannoli, *The Biology of Belief, How ours biology biases our beliefs and perceptions*, Rosseta Press, Inc, 1999, p.11.

<sup>16</sup> St. Maxim, *Mystagogy*, chap. II, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

“God, after having done and brought all to existence with endless power, sustains them, embraces and gathers them all together and to Him by His care, both the rational and the sensible ones.”<sup>18</sup>

This image of the merkhaba throne opens for us the true, eschatological perspective through which we must understand the manifestation of the spiritual works and powers of the human soul, that means entering through them not only the spiritual heavens, but identifying ourselves through them with God, because the merkhaba throne is exactly the image of God revealed to humankind.

These spiritual powers are knowledge and belief, and man unifies the cosmos especially when he enters deep states of contemplation (intuitive, mystical knowledge) as an expression of his belief. However, as it is affirmed by both the mystical tradition of the Church and neurotheology, there appears the danger for the soul in this state to be deceived by what it is convinced and believes, if there is not a harmonious synthesis between these two great spiritual powers of the soul.

This is how neurotheology describes this state of possible deceit, deception and hoax, and its specific physiology in connection with the repartition of the spiritual powers of the two hemispheres of the brain: “A *trance* is an altered state of consciousness, like sleepwalking, which involves the alpha state. Typical signs of being in an alpha trance are body relaxation, dilated pupils, and a high degree of suggestibility. Electrical measurements have shown that during a trance state the right brain hemisphere is much more active than the left brain hemisphere. In a simplified view, the right hemisphere deals with emotions and imagination, and functions without the capacity to relate present experiences to the past or the future. This is quite unlike the left hemisphere, which is analytical and rational, and constantly strives to find meaning in experiences and to place them into an overall context.”<sup>19</sup>

This is what Saint Maxim writes in his *Mystagogy*, as well, about the way in which the soul could reach the “faultless knowledge” or the “divine science”, as the expression of true belief full of discrimination:

“As reason is the work and manifestation of the mind, being to the mind as an effect to the cause. Also, prudence is the work and manifestation of wisdom, action is the work and manifestation of contemplation, virtue of knowledge, and belief, the work and manifestation of the unforgettable knowledge. Through them it is accomplished the inner relationship with truth and good, that is, with God, a relationship which the old wise man described as divine science, and *faultless knowledge*, and love and peace, in which and through which there is theosis.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> St. Maxim, *Mystagogy*, chap. I, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Giovannoli, *The Biology of Belief, How ours biology...*, p. 49-51.

<sup>20</sup> St. Maxim, *Mystagogy*, chap. V, p. 13.

In fact, what Saint Maxim is saying here is that in defining its beliefs, the soul must compulsorily use its rational capacities of analyzing reality. We present further on a more detailed description of the genesis process of beliefs in the soul, found in the same neurotheology books, explaining how this rational function is accomplished through probability analysis and judgment by the left prefrontal lobe. Moreover, we can deduce how this capacity of critical analysis can be diminished by a process of false indoctrination:

*“Our brains comprise left and right hemispheres, and typically one hemisphere dominates as a result of events determined before birth. The right hemisphere perceives experiences in the moment. It has no sense of how an experience fits into a context of prior experiences. By comparison, the left hemisphere attempts to place experiences into a context of its existing knowledge. As it attempts to do this, the left hemisphere is endeavoring to ascribe meaning to experiences. As we will see, this process gives rise to many of our erroneous beliefs. The left hemisphere includes a left prefrontal lobe that is capable of probability analysis and judgment. If you are left hemisphere dominant, cause and effect links “obvious” to your right hemisphere would be moderated by what seems probable to your left hemisphere. If you are right brain dominant, left hemisphere probability analysis is less influential and you are more likely to believe cause and effect linkages that do not, in fact, exist. Given this arrangement, when those of us who are right hemisphere dominant see a miracle, the left hemisphere dominant see a coincidence, because they are unlikely to accept supernatural or improbable intuitions as true. However, improbability is a judgment based on what we believe, and if left hemisphere dominant persons have been taught to believe that perceived supernatural phenomena are real, their conclusions about intuitions could be difficult to distinguish from those with right hemisphere dominance. It follows that our existing beliefs and hemisphere dominance combine to influence the believability of our intuitions about everything, including intuitions about things beyond our actual experience (our extra-experiential intuitions).”<sup>21</sup>*

As we can see, neurotheological studies conceive belief in a psychological way, as suggestibility or believability of the subject in certain things, persons or situations of life. Nevertheless, the cerebral mechanism revealed by it helps us in some measure to understand the religious belief, also conceived as active and determining power operating in the soul and in the world, not only to convince the believer inherently, but also, effectively to transform the world by the work of miracles. And this is the belief which Saint Maxim refers to, one which is the result of the complex synthesis of all spiritual virtues.

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<sup>21</sup> Joseph Giovannoli, *The Biology of Belief, How ours biology...*, p. 11-12.



However, in order to make his teaching comprehensible in this regard, we will try to resume here his complex descriptive effort from the first chapters of his *Mystagogy*.

In a brief declaration in his foreword, he excuses himself that, from the rich teaching of the old wise man, he “will only present those preserved in his memory and which he can understand in an obscure way and he can expose in a more obscure way, but with piety, by the grace of God which illuminates all those obscure”<sup>22</sup>, meaning that he will try to give a logical explanation intermediated by reason or by the left hemisphere of the brain. He compares “virtue” (situated in his above-mentioned classification as preceding belief and depending on reason, in the left hemisphere of the brain) with the “moon”, and “knowledge” (situated in his above mentioned classification as preceding the “unforgettable knowledge” and depending on the mind, in the right hemisphere of the brain) with the “sun”.

In his logic and classifications, in the rational and linear way of analyzing reality, the light and the enlightenment of reason penetrate reality in a more difficult way, sequential and punctual, only like the weak light of the moon, and this sort of rational knowledge can be acquired from the world, from the sensible cosmos, from the bodily senses, from the beauties of the earth, all of these corresponding to the nave (naos) of the church – where, through icons and teachings, the people of God receive, in a discursive way, the wisdom of salvation. Opposite to this, in the intuitional and inspirational way of acquiring knowledge, the mind receives, through great and complex illuminations achieved through “the symbolic contemplation of intelligible things intermediated by the visible ones [which] is the spiritual knowledge and understanding of visible things intermediated by the invisible ones”.<sup>23</sup> The spiritual realms contemplated in this symbolic way are the soul in the inner world, heaven in the material macroscopic world, and the intelligible world of celestial beings in the cosmos created by God, these realms corresponding to the hieration or the altar space of the church, where only the initiated clergymen have permission to enter and to worship God.

Moreover, in the fourth chapter of his *Mystagogy*, Saint Maxim clearly describes the special function of the mind in this liturgical unifying action of the soul in the intelligible and material cosmos, the mind being exactly the altar table on and through which man „penetrates the mystical knowledge of God, the mystical theology”, “calling the most praised silence of the great unknown and hidden speech communication of divinity, that from the impenetrable profundity, through other speaking and deeply echoing silence.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> St. Maxim, *Mystagogy*, chap. I, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> St. Maxim, *Mystagogy*, chap. II, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> St. Maxim, *Mystagogy*, chap. IV, p. 10.

We could not say that, at the completion of this innermost liturgy equivalent to the mystical theology worshipped by the mind, it does not participate at all, as we can conclude both from the mystical wisdom of Saint Maxim and from the studies of neurophysiology, the “practical wisdom” manifested by accomplishing commandments by the body, and also the “natural knowledge” achieved through reason which “brings as through hieration the meanings detached by the organs of feeling, after it – the reason – separates them from all the material and unclean things”. Contrary to the extreme oriental conception about ecstasy which influences studies of neurotheology and understands ecstasy as a complete detachment of the body from the world, in this mystical and ecstatic liturgy of the mind, as it is described by Saint Maxim, the body and the spiritual powers and virtues of the soul are also deeply engaged in it, revealing or “shining out the acting part or function of the soul”, and the soul itself works continuously, by its natural energies or activities in synergy with the divine ones, to purify, through the diacritic power of reason, the meanings and the feelings provided by the world. In fact, according to the Christian mystical tradition, also expressed by Saint Maxim, the Logos – the Word of God and the Holy Spirit Himself are present in the human soul like a torch illuminating the human reason and mind in their work of contemplation and distinction.

Therefore, we can not identify the high mystical state of belief envisaged by Saint Maxim with that one described by neurophysiologists, in which, for example, the fact that the “electrical activity in the left hemisphere is low during alpha trances while the right hemisphere is active, suggests that during alpha trances our connection with reality and the source of our skepticism is diminished and that we are much more likely to believe what we are told.”<sup>25</sup>

We can not reduce the high mystical state from Saint Maxim’s Mystagogy to a “...feeling of detachment from reality, perceived by some as disinterested wisdom and freedom from desire — or a higher state of consciousness”, resulted from “stifling of virtually all left hemisphere rational thought”, because Saint Maxim presents a structure of spiritual powers which prepare and contribute effectively to a personal communion of man with a personal God Who shares and pours His grace into man’s heart. Nevertheless, the neurophysiologic model is useful, and gives us some essential insights into this mystic state, also confirmed, partially, by Saint Maxim.

The neurotheological models of ecstasy described by neurophysiologists like Andrew Newberg and Eugene D’Aquili, conceive an active and a passive approach to this spiritual state. In both cases the most important element is the *deafferentation* of the attention areas which creates the sense of losing the self, of limitless and timeless inner space specific to the ecstatic state. This state is

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<sup>25</sup> Joseph Giovannoli, *The Biology of Belief, How our biology biases...*, p. 49-51.

induced either through the concentration on a single image of God as in the active approach, or through “willful intention to clear all thoughts, emotions, and perceptions from the mind” in the passive approach, a situation resembling more to what Saint Maxim understands of the mystical state of belief in his *Mystagogy*.<sup>26</sup> Again, however, we can not reduce the mystical state of belief to a complete deafferentation and total lack of activity of some or of all the areas of the brain, because, even in the natural model of ecstasy, the other studies in neurophysiology affirm the activity in this and in other areas:

“Unlike the temporal lobe epilepsy theory of conversion, new evidence increasingly suggests that religious experiences (and by implication, perhaps also conversion) are cognitively mediated (Azari, in press). Azari (in press) found that religious subjects in a religious state had higher blood flow in the right dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, as indicated by PET. This brain area did not appear active in nonreligious subjects”<sup>27</sup>, and “the process of spiritual transformation inherently involves complex cognitive processes such as subjective awareness and belief-thought, and sufficient changes in them may constitute a transformed self-identity. Meaning making, furthermore, is a complex cognitive process that involves appraising information in the light of global beliefs (Park, 2005; Park & Folkman, 1997; Silberman, 2005). Therefore, based upon Azari et al.’s (2001b) PET findings and the way religion and spirituality seem to be involved with higher order cognition in meaning making (Paloutzian & Swenson, in press), we think that the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex may be active during spiritual transformations.”<sup>28</sup>

As a result, we believe that, from this perspective as well, the mind liturgy of Saint Maxim supposes a continuous integration of the spiritual powers of the soul through the divine power manifested, as we will see, through the repose of the divine throne of glory in the human soul.

The belief which Saint Maxim refers to is not only the result of the activity of the cognitive operators in the left hemisphere of the brain, which filtrate through complex distinctions and synthesis what the attention area should be convinced about, but it is mainly the overwhelming feeling of deep peace as an expression of total trust and conviction of reason in the presence of God. Thus, belief is not the expression of complete cut off from the earthly thoughts, but the result of something

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<sup>26</sup> Andrew Newberg, Eugene D’Aquili, *Why God Won’t Go Away*, p. 117-121.

<sup>27</sup> Patrick McNamara, *Where God and Science Meet, How Brain and Evolutionary Studies Alter Our Understanding of Religion, The Psychology of Religious Experience*, Vol. II, PRAEGER PERSPECTIVES Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality, J. Harold Ellens, Series Editor, chapter: “The Neurocognition of Meaning Making”, p. 162.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 163.

more than this, meaning of rapture, understood not as the physical departure of the spirit from the body, but as the affective integration of the rested and turned off reason with the pacified and simplified mind, emptied of all earthly images. If the integration of spiritual powers is the indispensable condition for the soul to reach mystical theology, there is not a disconnection of the rational part of the soul from the mind, but an overwhelming of the reason and of the mind by the power of the holy grace, of the uncreated energies which bring peace, not as a lack of activity, but as comfort and plenitude of the presence of God. This is why Saint Maxim identifies belief with the kingdom of God, and with the presence of God in the soul, in *Question 33* from his answers to Thalasius, where he debates the same theme of belief and knowledge.

“Finally the Lord, teaching about the mysterious things and those expected and invisible, says: “the kingdom of God is in your heart (Lc. 17, 21). *Thus, the belief in God is the same with the kingdom of God.* It differs from the kingdom only *by thinking*, because belief is the kingdom of God without a form, and the Kingdom is a belief that has received a form in a wonderful way. Therefore, based on this, belief is not outside us; but we, cultivating it through the divine commandments, make it become the kingdom of God which is known only by those who have it, *so His kingdom in eternity is the divine Logos.* But then, any mind becomes Sophia, according to its progress in gathering all the reasons in itself and deepening them.”<sup>29</sup>

In the same answer we also find a very important emphasis for our understanding of the rapport between reason and belief, placed in the question sentence itself. Namely, Thalasius asks what it means that “*he will not make distinction in his heart*, but will believe that what he says will be fulfilled...”; and this, corroborated with the references that the belief in God “*differs from the kingdom only by thinking*” and with “*His kingdom from eternity is the divine Logos*”, give the real understanding of the work of belief in the soul as one which, asking reason “not to make any distinction in the heart”, annuls its *difference* from the kingdom reaching *the eternity* of the Logos’ Kingdom. The eloquence and the importance of the text for the debated subject make necessary its large presentation here:

“God is faith developed through work. And this kingdom (of belief) achieves the unmediated unification with God for those who are part of it. Therefore it was clearly proved that faith is a connecting power, which renders the perfect, unmediated and supernatural union of the one who believes with the believed God. Man, consisting of soul and body, is carried by two laws, that of the flesh and that of the spirit. The law of the body has feeling at its disposal (the work of senses),

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<sup>29</sup> St. Maxim, *Questiones ad Thalasius*, 33, in: Filocalia Româneasc III, p. 154.

whereas the law of the spirit, the work of the mind. The law of the body, working through senses, enfetters man in matter, and that of the spirit, working through the mind, achieves unmediatedly his unification with God. Therefore, truly "the one who does not make distinction in his heart", that is who does not distinguish with his mind, or does not cut the unmediated union with God, produced through faith, as one that has become passionless, or rather god, due to the union through faith, " will tell the mountain to move and it will move". The word "it" indicates thinking and the law of the body, which is really difficult and hard to displace, or, for the natural power, completely unmovable and fixed. As so much was the power of natural thinking deep-rooted in peoples' nature through the irrational work of the senses, that many do not even believe that man is more than flesh, with the feeling as power by which he enjoys this life. All are possible therefore, to the one who believes and makes no distinction; that means the one who does not cut the union carried out by faith between his mind and God, for the sake of the affectionate connection between soul and body, supported by feeling. Because all the things estranging the mind from the world and from the body and linking it to God, are perfect in their results."<sup>30</sup>

What Saint Maxim means to say here is that the union achieved between the mind and God through belief (the activity of the right hemisphere and thalamus) must not be cut or interrupted by rational thinking (the activity of the left hemisphere), that is by the sensuous link existing between soul and body sustained by sensitivity. And this is confirmed also by another quotation on the same subject from Question 54 in same book:

"As all activity is accomplished for good and all contemplation searches knowledge only for the truth. After the soul has reached them, it would be yet anything to disturb its activity, or to attract contemplation through unfamiliar visions. As the soul has prevailed over all things that are and are thought, and has worn up God Himself, Who is the only Good and Truth and is above all being and understanding."<sup>31</sup>

This deep and close relationship, this embrace of the soul by and in God, is described by Saint Maxim also as that through which the soul reaches coronate by the first, one and single Reason, the rational power of the human soul not being completely annulled, although "it will not be in it the reason that scatters it through many thoughts", but the human reason will function in and through this unique Reason in which "there are and subsist all the reasons of the things in an ineffable simplicity, in a unitary way, as in the Creator and the Maker of all those which exist."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Sf. Maxim, *Questiones ad Thalassium*, 33, in: FR III, p. 146.

<sup>31</sup> Sf. Maxim, *Questiones ad Thalassium*, 54, in: FR III, p. 234.

<sup>32</sup> St. Maxim, *Mystagogy*, chap. V, p. 14.

Only this eternal and eschatological perspective in which the soul is opened by belief could concur with Saint Maxim's mystical construction of virtues schematically presented above, because belief, summing up the virtues of reason, as the manifestation of knowledge and of all the virtues of the mind, attains the great inner synthesis which unifies the soul in itself, but also, spiritually, with the image of God – the Logos – from eternity which He is congruent with. In the same Question 33, Saint Maxim defines, with Saint Apostle Paul, the belief as “hypostasis of those expected and the evidence of unseen things” (Ebr. 11. 1), again a definition which leads to the eschatological realm in which all created things are rooted, and from where all has come into existence at the beginning of the world and come into existence (acquire hypostasis) when man, through belief, reaches this beginning (*arhe* or *bereshit*).

The soul and the brain, as its expression organ, reach real unity in their function only when, through belief, enter this supra-temporal *arhe*, the high integrated state of the two main parts and functions being only the precursor effort of this metaphysical state. This high integrated state is apophatic and contradictory in its essence, because the belief part or function of the brain believes without believing, without judging, rationalizing as habitual the information received from the right hemisphere, but by the overwhelming feeling – flow of peace; and because the knowledge part or function of the brain knows without knowing, without receiving any more flow of information and patterns, images from the world as habitual, but by the overwhelming seeing of the formless light of God's beauty.

The background and essential element for understanding this complex spiritual state, architecture and integration of virtues, and through this, the active power of belief in the human soul at Saint Maxim, is the platonic cosmologic conception, inherited also by Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, whom Saint Maxim completes in fact in his *Mystagogia*, about the spiritual sun as the center of the hierarchical disposition of spiritual beings which surround it on different levels of transparence and proximity. It is very important for our essay to understand Saint Maxim's doctrine about knowledge and belief in this new context of provocative neurotheology and, also, in the context of changing the cosmological paradigm determined by the great discoveries in this and other fields, as for example quanta physics which might provide the possible ground for preserving the immateriality and transcendence of the spiritual and celestial realm. In fact, the spiritual sun is “the beginning and the cause”, the initial *arhe* or *bereshit* from the Genesis, the supra-temporal and eternal realm from which the entire world, containing *in nuce* all things, was created as an *image of God*, a *merkhaba* throne or a macroanthropos, that Saint Maxim also refers to, as we have pointed out, in his *Mystagogy* in connection with the power and the work of belief.

In this spiritual cosmos, belief is the essential and indispensable relationship which gathers together and keeps in unity all created natures, beings and things, around and in God, and it is in the Church that this relationship with God is truly achieved: “Keeping them around Him, as cause, beginning and scope, He makes all those are distanced from each other by nature, to agree each others through the unique power of the relationship towards him as the beginning.”<sup>33</sup>

Saint Maxim also talks here about the fact that this relationship is truly achieved in the Church, stressing again that this belief, working in the mind through the power of God’s grace, overwhelms all other individual and natural relationships established by human reason in its analytical effort of knowledge and belief: “But to all, the Church gives alike a single form and divine name, that means the existence and the name from Christ; and a safe and undivided relationship through belief, simple and without parts, which does not allow the many relationships of everyone to be known (which hides, annuls discursive, linear thinking), not even the fact that they (the relationships) exist, because of the universal reporting and concentration of everything toward it.”<sup>34</sup>

Even so, reason is not completely annulled in this process of believing. The reason power of the soul is not annulled through the virtue of belief, but it is preserved in a mystical way, and Saint Maxim indeed assigns to human reason a key role in accomplishing a synergy between the human spiritual powers of knowledge and belief and the divine power which overwhelms them. The decade of spiritual virtues described by Saint Maxim “makes reason to resound in spirit” when grace helps and empowers the fulfillment of the other decade, of the commandments, and it is: “the reason (the Logos) [which] brings Jesus God and my Savior back, complete *through me* the saved one, to itself, which is forever entirely full and it can never get out of itself: and me, the man, it restores in a marvelous way in itself, or, better said, in God, from Whom I have received the existence and to Whom I aspire, longing to obtain happiness from far away.”<sup>35</sup>

Thus, in fact, the human mind and reason become full of God, incorporated and transformed entirely in the Church which is the only one giving “a safe and undivided relationship through belief” when man accomplishes belief as the manifestation of unforgettable knowledge of God, that is when he achieves through the thalamus the perfect integration of both the rational and intuitive types of knowledge, specific to the two hemispheres of brain, the intensity of the feeling of the presence of God „does not allowing the many relationships of everyone to

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<sup>33</sup> St. Maxim, *Mystagogy*, chap. I, p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> St. Maxim, *Mystagogy*, chap. I, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> St. Maxim, *Mystagogy*, chap. V, p. 11.

be known ... , not even the fact that they (the relationships) exist”, that means covering and overwhelming the natural discursive and linear way of thinking.

The marvelous description of the work of belief in the cosmos, defined, again, as “the unique power of the relationship towards God, as arhe”, reveals one more time this sublime way in which this spiritual power keeps the things of the cosmos in distinctiveness and in unity, and gives us the possibility to also understand how the overwhelming of the soul by grace does not annul and destroy the natural activity of the reason and mind, because these spiritual powers of the soul are also contained in God as the cause, beginning and scope of all existences.

“Through it, all things are brought to the unbroken and uninterrupted identity of movement and of being, no thing rebelling and disjoining at the beginning (en arhe) against another on the basis of their difference in nature or movement. All exist in communion among themselves, without confusion, on the grounds of the unique and indissoluble link in which are kept by the unique beginning (arhe) and cause (reason), and on the grounds of protection (pronia - pronoia), because this link pacifies and covers all the specific relationship seen in all things according to their nature, *not altering or abolishing them and making them not to exist any more, but overwhelming them and showing itself (that means the link of the belief) above all as the whole appears when confronted to the parts*, or better said, the cause (reason) of the whole, due to which both the whole and the parts of the whole appear and exist. These show the entire cause (Reason) glowing above them and, as the super luminous sun covers nature and the star light, so the cause (reason) of those covers their existence, as of caused things. Because as the parts (things reasoned through the left hemisphere) exist as such and are known from the whole (from the patterns known through the right hemisphere), so exist and are known from the cause those which are caused, and their particularity takes rest when, being embraced by the reference to the cause, are crossed by it and entirely receive its qualification, through the unique power of the relationship with it, as it has been said.”<sup>36</sup>

In the same context of the mystical understanding of the Church, Saint Maxim defines belief once again, in a similar relational way, speaking about „the unique grace and unique simple and undivided power of faith (belief) which unify and make all believers exist together, and he details this power of faith as being “the unique simple and endlessly wise power of goodness” through which the community of the first Christians “had all one heart and one soul” (Acts 4, 32), and through which „He (Christ) approaches all in Himself... , as *the center* of some straight lines starting from Him, in His quality of unique and simple cause and power, unallowing to separate the beginnings of things from their ends, and

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<sup>36</sup> St. Maxim, *Mystagogy*, chap. I, p 7.



circumscribing their extensions in a circle and gathering to Himself the distinctions of things made by Him.”<sup>37</sup>

Saint Maxim does not also speak about, for example, „the unique simple and undivided power” of the „unforgettable knowledge”, or about „the unique simple and endlessly wise power” of truth, as the supreme end of the virtue of „unforgettable knowledge”, and from this fact we can deduce one more time that his model of understanding is divinely inspired, being, in fact, confirmed now by neurotheology which also affirms the same circuit of the information flow and concentration, after the successive passage through the right hemisphere and the left one, to the thalamus, where it is perceived as the active power of belief giving sense to spiritual things.

Through the power of belief, man gathers, reassembles the divided parts of the universe keeping it in unity, and it is in the assembly of the Church and in the powers of remembrance and attention of the soul’s inner Church, in the inner worship of God’s contemplation in creation realized by the believer through his spiritual powers of knowledge and belief, that this unifying power of God is manifested:

“The soul, fixing itself towards The One (God), Who is not exterior to it, but entire in its entirety, will know itself through simple intuition (probably through the right hemisphere), the reasons and causes of things, for the sake of which, before make itself the bride of Logos – God, used to obey the methods (of reason) which divide. And through these reasons it will be borne in an appropriate and liberating way to the Maker and Gatherer of all reason and cause Himself.”<sup>38</sup>

This means that man will know, will discern the reasons and causes of things, now, not through his natural reason, but through the power of God’s Logos, of God’s Spirit reposing in the human reason, in the human soul, and operating all the knowledge activities, including that of the belief in a sublime and supernatural way, transforming, indeed, the soul in a merkhaba throne in which God moves as a circle inside a circle, in a perichoretical way, both the human and divine natures, and the natural and divine modes of knowledge and belief.

“Thus God, Who is above all in an infinite extent, being all in all, will be the only one seen by those clean in comprehension, when the mind, contemplatively meditating to the meanings of the things, will arrive at God Himself as the cause (reason), the beginning and the final scope of the birth and the becoming of everything, and as the deep and unremote bosom of the entire content. In the same

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<sup>37</sup> St. Maxim, *Mystagogy*, chap. I, p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> St. Maxim, *Mystagogy*, chap. V, p. 14.

way the Holy Church of God as well shows itself to us doing the same things with us as God, imitating Him as an icon imitates its model.<sup>39</sup>

### **Conclusions**

We believe that it is both necessary and possible to make some conclusive affirmations at the end of this essay approaching these two great domains of scientific knowledge, and the fact that the mystical theology of Saint Maxim excels by its concise, intuitive and articulated philosophic style, and the neurotheology books are generally characterized by their positivist and analytic spirit of understanding, give us the means to preserve the same method of approach to the subject, obtaining a synthetic result in which the things and the domains explain and complete each other, realizing full argued scientific truths.

We can conclude that the lines of virtues from the chart presented above, the ladder exposing the hierarchy of the soul's powers in Saint Maxim's *Mystagogy*, are not an artificial or metaphorical composition of psychological faculties, but, as we could observe, are articulated or harmonious constructions of these faculties capable to explain, through belief, the link with the metaphysical realm, with what exists and what does not exist (through meanings or symbols), in both the material and the intelligible world, neurotheology scientifically confirming to us what Saint Maxim has revealed in a mystical way.

Although, as we could see in the texts reproduced so far, neurotheology has sketched a very logical explanation of the rapport between knowledge and belief, we can also see that the great doubt in which it finds itself is the realness of the divine realm touched by the spirit in contemplation, affirming and reducing the spiritual states and perceptions, as being only impressions fabricated by the brain's neurochemistry and physiology without any metaphysic and divine content. In this perspective the spiritual phenomena sensed by the anchorite do not conduct to the communion with God because these spiritual experiences do not really prove that God exists as a Personal Reality.

In this regard, mystic theology, from which neurotheology inherits both its name and a part of its doctrinal content, affirms that the existence of things is perceived, finally, through faith; and, if in the material world the qualification of the existence of things is determined by their degree of materiality, in the spiritual one, the existence of thoughts and their effectiveness depend on their sublimity, immaterial character and spirituality.

The Christian mystic, with God as the supreme Creator of all intelligible and sensible things, makes the effort of faith culminate not in some form of autosuggestion or singular or collective hallucination of the believers, but in

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<sup>39</sup> St. Maxim, *Mystagogy*, chap. I, p. 7.

offering a hypostasis to unseen things, and in bringing, in some cases, of things from the intelligible existence to the material one. The power of faith, rooted in the metaphysical realm symbolized by the term *arhe*, is that which offers support to the possibility of accomplishing miracles, that is supernatural and unusual actions and things. As we have seen, in this respect, neurotheology affirms that the left hemisphere of the brain, that of reason, acts as a filter, giving or not the necessary credibility to the intuitions made by the right hemisphere and, in this way, rendering psychologically real the things or the situations intuited by the right hemisphere. Moreover, the *arhe* and *merkhaba* throne doctrines found in Saint Maxim' *Mystagogy*, offer the metaphysical substratum for the possibility that the contemplated things and thoughts be brought to existence by faith. God transcends the knowledge attained, intermediated by mind and reason, through the mind, man intuiting those things yet inexistent, and through reason judging those declared as existent by the filters of the left hemisphere, which decide the credibility of their existence. Another cosmological conception needs to be accepted here: that of the mystical and hierarchical cosmos in which the human soul intermediates between the uncreated and created things, the Church and the ancient philosophic tradition preserving this conception, and the modern science confirming it through discoveries, as those from neurotheology and quantic physics.

The fact that in God as the supreme Reason, “are and subsist all reasons of things in an ineffable simplicity, in a unitary way, as in the Creator and the Maker of all those which exist”, and that this supreme Reason finally reposes, through the spiritual effort of faith, in the human mind, and that the mind knows through the visible things those which are invisible, helped by belief, and that reason believes through the invisible things those which are visible, helped by knowledge, confirm the inner circular model of the spiritual movement of the soul in its effort to comprehend and to unify the intelligible and the material cosmos which interpenetrate in the same way.

The exact reference of Saint Maxim to the *merkhaba* vision from the first chapter of Ezekiel, even though in a clear cosmologic context, gives us the complete and deep understanding of the mind liturgy in his conception, the spirit and the brain as its organ, acting to know the cosmos as a *merkhaba* throne, interweaving the intuitive knowledge from the right hemisphere with the reasonable one from the left hemisphere of the brain, achieving what the hesychast tradition names “the circular movement of the mind in the heart”, and making the human heart – the inner chamber of the spirit – the thalamus, the throne of God in the temple of the human body.

Furthermore, the *merkhaba* reference from Saint Maxim, gives the answer to what some exponents of modern neurotheology cannot conceive, meaning that, through the belief in God as the unique cause and reason, the human mind reaches

the metaphysical and divine realm that really exists even if in an energetic mode, the visions experienced in this state of deep belief not being just some hallucinations of the mind, but the real imaginary things and patterns, known mainly through the right hemisphere of the brain, whose efficiency is as strong in this world as are the clarity and the purity of the spirit of the seer. For example, the Apocalypse of Saint John structures the entire history until the end of the world, and to take another example, more concrete but otherwise very well-known, the spiritual visions and fights of Saint Anthonius the Great or of other hermits from Apophtegma Patrum show the real defeat of the devil for a long period of time.

Behind this material reality in which we live, there is a spiritual one, full of celestial entities, full of our good and bad thoughts revealed as visions or hallucinations, and we can not ignore it or qualify it as not existing. Some enlightening scientific ideas come, in this respect, from the cosmological theory of quantic physics, as the first lines and honest researches Eugene D'Aquilli and Andrew Newberg both agree, and was very intuitively shown, for example, in the famous and well-known film *What the bleep do we know*.

The Judeo-Christian religious tradition has the teaching about the arhe, bereshit in which the throne merhaba is identified, composing of virtues the holy image of God according to which man was also created. The man has in himself the image of God, the arhe, he is capax Dei, having access to the divine realm, and this gives a real content to the virtue of belief in the maximian teaching, the soul acting, through the above mentioned way of interweaving its virtues and powers, as a merhaba throne, or as indeed the true image of God.