The Religious Discourse – Liturgical, Sacramental and Soteriological Act

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L'auteur de cette étude se propose de mettre en évidence le fait que le sermon, la forme la plus fréquente du discours religieux, avant d'être production littéraire (et analysée comme telle) est un acte liturgique, sacramental et sotériologique. Plus précisément: acte de culte, source de grâce et de foi, préparation pour l'Eucharistie, absolument nécessaire pour le salut. En subsidiaire, l'étude présente quelques associations illustratives, pour mieux comprendre le caractère liturgique du discours religieux: le lieu de culte, les chants du chœur ou bien autour du lutrin, les pèlerinages, etc.

Mots-clés: culte, sermon, liturgie, sacramental, sotériologique, art.

Premises

The sermon delivered within the divine service is the most frequently used form of religious discourse at all Christian confessions. The term „sermon" has a general meaning, including all the other names: preaching, didaché (*theacing*), homily, panegyric, parenesis, etc.

Another form of religious discourse, less frequent, but no less illustrative, is that of the religious conferences. Still, they do not have a part within the divine office as such, but in various lay and church-related institutions, generally academic. This presentation will be limited to the sermon, a religious discourse pre-eminently liturgical, sacramental and soteriological.

In the recent past, philologists analyzed many of the sermons delivered by important Romanian preachers mostly from the point of view of their content of ideas and of the stylistic and literary strategies used. This also happened within the set of conferences „Religious Text and Discourse". We consider necessary to enrich this approach with the liturgical perspective, taking into account the fact that the religious discourse is pre-eminently part of the cult. With few exceptions, the sermons published in various books and magazines had been previously delivered within the divine office on Sundays or feast days. Their purpose, as well as their effect, is not only didactic and pedagogical, but, first of all, sacramental (sanctifying). This effect results in their soteriological end (related to salvation). Therefore, the religious discourse, before being a literary work, is a work of salvation. This situation is similar to that of our church buildings: before being art monuments (even if they are, especially the old ones), they are places of worship,

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meant for salvation. That is why we do not actually mean „art for art" when we speak about the church or the religious discourse. We mean *art for God's glory and for human salvation.*

1. Homiletical function of the word[1]

In biblical and patristic terminology, the notion or concept of „word" has three meanings: *divine hypostasis (Jesus Christ – Embodied Logos), the word that He communicates* and *The Holy Scriptures (the revealed Word)*. Beside these, by „word" we understand *speech sounds*, as well as the *inner word,* unspoken, but present in our hearts. When Saint John the Evangelist writes „In the beginning was the Word…" (1, 1) and „All things were made by Him (*by the Word*)…" (1, 3), he shows us both the eternity of the divine hypostasis, Jesus Christ, and the primordiality of speech in the act of creation. The consecrated terms, the Greek „λόγος" and the Hebrew „דבר" (*davár/dabár*) mean, simultaneously, the word and the action, but they also mean *reason, report, sense, good order*. The Romanian „cuvânt" („word"), as Eminescu wrote in one of his notebooks, „comes from *conventus*, which means human gathering"[2]. The Latin word „conventus" is indeed a passive perfect participle from „convenio-ire…", verb translated by *come together, gather, agree (hence the Romanian verb „a conveni"- to come to an agreement)*, which indicates the meaning of communion, relation, harmony, unity. Therefore, the word's mission and structure are dialogical and it is complete only when it becomes communication of something, but also response to that communication. The word, or articulated speech, makes the human being essentially different from all the other beings. Saint Gregory of Nyssa expressed this fundamental difference between humans and animals when he metaphorically showed the utility of the hands, saying: "The hands were given to humans to help them speak. If they did not have hands, then their lips and tongue would be similar to those of animals, to help them seize the grass and cut it. But as hands took over food procurement, the mouth's role remained that of expressing words. Therefore, it is right to say that the hands are an instrument typical for beings gifted with the faculty of speech"[3].

Words' power of influence is huge, as one can easily notice not only from the great historic moments and cultural works, but also from every-day „trifles". *As in fairy tales is the power of the word!* – this is the poetical warning of Al. Vlahuţă (*The Word*), because every word involves concrete, personal relations. The word goes from one person to another. People do not speak in vain. They do not speak for themselves, to hear themselves, but to be listened to. The word is not somebody's property, it is a *common good*. That is why, as of any common good,

[1] Paragraphs 1 and 2 of this study belong to the "Homiletics course for students", chapter "The Sermon, the Preacher and the Listeners", prepared to be published very soon, under the supervision of the undersigned.

[2] Ms. 2275 B, f. 93.

[3] *Περί κατασκευής τού Ανθρώπου / De hominis opificio, PG, 44, 149.*

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one can make use of the word only within certain limits, observing certain rules, being always aware of its normal function, that of conveying what is right and true. Moreover, in the economy of salvation, the word has a sacramental power, both within the cult and in the sermon, because liturgical and homiletically texts are not exclusively the product of the human mind, but the result of a divine and human synergy. In his well-known book „The Power of the Word"[4], the orthodox priest John Breck remarkably showed the great power of the word, pointing mostly to its liturgical and sacramental role. In the present study, in order to follow the word's homiletically functions or qualities step by step, we shall first present the positive, beneficial influences of the inspiring words of wisdom, as opposed to the negative influences of bad, degenerate words, part of a vulgar and destructive anti-language. Apart from the vocabulary that we can hear in the street, which seems to be more and more polluted, we must notice the fact that the word is often turned from its sacred, unifying role of communion even within the parish-based communities, in Christian families' life, as well as in any type of institution. From discussions with spiritual sons and daughters, over the years during Confession or in private dialogues, priests realize that most of the wounds and sufferings felt by their parishers have not necessarily resulted from diseases or material needs, but rather from harsh, insulting words that they have to endure days and years on end. Their origin? An extremely intolerant and angry boss, parents that are too strict, a spouse with ultra-dictatorial discourse, colleagues always trying to find fault with somebody, unknown people who, wherever they may be, cannot refrain from poisoning with their words whoever they come across, and so on. We are sometimes doomed to hear, directly or indirectly, destroying words coming from close people that we love, from whom we did not expect such treatment, or from people highly „educated", which makes the shock and the wounds even worse! Therefore, the more beneficial and constructive are the good and beautiful words, the more harmful are the bad ones. In this respect, Father Stăniloae gives a concise and clear warning: „The word can build, but it can also destroy!"[5]. In the same line, Father Rafail Noica subtly writes: „The word is a creative energy, but an energy that becomes *dangerous*, *mortal*, when it is improperly used"[6]. What does the Holy Scripture say about this? There are a lot of references to the inspiring words of wisdom and their wonderful impact, but also to the bad ones, with the most toxic effect. Here is a short selection, without further comments. First of all, about the good ones: „Pleasant words are as honey-comb, sweet to the soul and health to the bones…" (*Proverbs* 16, 24); „A good word makes the heart glad!" (*Proverbs* 12,

[4] J. Breck, *The Power of the Word, S*t. Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York, 1986. See also the Romanian translation: *Puterea Cuvântului în Biserica drept-măritoare*, Ed. Institutului Biblic şi de Misiune, Bucharest, 1999.

[5] Pr. D. Stăniloae, *Jesus Christ or the Restoration of Man*, Sibiu, 1943, p. 219.

[6] **** The Other Noica – Testimonies of Monk Rafail, accompanied by some useful words of Father Symeon*, *edited by* Pr. Eugen Drăgoi and Pr. Ninel Ţugui, Editura Anastasia, Bucharest, 1994, p. 67.

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25); „A good man out of the good treasure of the heart brings forth good things…" (*Matthew* 12, 35). As for the bad words, there are plenty of warnings in the Holy Book: „A fool's lips enter into contention, and his mouth calls for strokes" (*Proverbs* 18, 6); „An evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things" (*Matthew* 12, 35); „These (unrighteous false teachers)… (often) speak evil of the things they do not understand" (*2 Peter* 2, 12); „But avoid irreverent babble, for they will increase into more ungodliness. And their word will eat as does a canker" (*2 Tim.* 2, 16, 17).

Words' restoration and rehabilitation. Let us consider the fact that by the fall of mankind into sin, along with the degradation and darkening of the creation, in general, the word also suffered degradation and darkening. That is why Jesus Christ, the Saviour, while restoring the creation, also restored the human words, rehabilitating them and even more, making them divine. By taking human body, He also took human speech. He came to sanctify the body, but also speech. "Never man spoke like this Man!" – exclaimed those who listened with fascination to the Lord's words (*John* 7, 46). His godly power, by which he healed, comforted, encouraged etc. was revealed, in fact, by words. We can see, therefore, that our Saviour gave us example and earnest to improve the use of words, His New Testament being also an exhortation to use Bible-inspired, *Gospel-based* words not only within the liturgical context of the divine office, but also for „the completion of our life". Still, we have to insist on the fact that the exercise of improving their use takes place in the Holy Churches. Listening to the divine office, but also to the properly delivered sermons, every Christian has the chance to clean, to detoxicate and to improve the use of their own words. Back home and then out into the world, the healed word, with the seal of grace, will be full of dignity and beauty, pleasant, inspiring, tonic and it will positively influence all people around, known and unknown, just like *the little leaven* that *leavens the whole lump* (*Gal.* 5, 9).

From the homiletical point of view, the word has some well determined functions:

- *practical function,* in that of concrete applicability. If ordinary words transmit ideas and information that can remain abstract, homiletical words always transmit teachings that can be applied in the life of those who listen, with a view to salvation. For example, teaching the love of the enemies is not meant to offer a theory, but to be applied in every-day behaviour. When the Lord gave us this commandment, he did not do it with a view to make us start speculations and abstractions, but to make us have relations with them, with the „unfriends", show understanding, love, patience and perseverance. Same situation for teachings about pity, kindness, humility, hope, justice, self-sacrifice, etc.;

- *scripturistic function*, as the sermon transmits and interpretes God's word, not something else. Let us consider that our Saviour said, *go... and teach all nations… to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you* (*Matthew* 28, 19). Therefore, *what was commanded through the Gospels, not elsewhere.* As St. Paul the Apostle warns, as well: „For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the

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Lord" (*2 Corinthians* 4, 5). Meaning that *we preach His teaching*, not our teaching or that of others;

- *charismatic function*, because the sermon transmits not only knowledge, but also grace and its power, originating in Christ. Let us remember the words of Saint Matthew the Evangelist: „For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes…" (7, 29). He obviously writes about the grace of faith, grace that prepares the way (does not necessarily save!) in order to get people closer and closer to the Eucharist, the only one that can save;

- *liturgical function*, meaning that the sermon is not an isolated act, a didactic addition, but *liturgical act*, part of the divine office.

We shall enlarge upon these last two functions in the next paragraph, in which we shall explicitly approach the liturgical, sacramental and soteriological nature of the sermon.

2. The sermon – liturgical, sacramental and soteriological act

Etymologically, the Romanian term „predică" (*sermon*) has its origin in the Latin word „praedico" – *to proclaim, to make known, to praise (praedicatio – public proclaiming, announcement, praise*). In patristic literature, the word „predică" (sermon) was consecrated by Tertulian (160-240), taken over from Greek and Roman rhetoric. We can find it, for example, in Cicero's famous treatise on oration (ex.: *Haec eo mihi praedicenda fuernut…*)[7].

The sermon is generally defined in lay dictionaries as *a speech made by a clergyman in the church, explaining and commenting a biblical text and giving moral guidance to the faithful people.* From a homiletical point of view, *the sermon is a liturgical act, integrated within the divine office, by means of which consecrated ministers transmit God's teachings to the faithful in order to lighten their mind, to warm their heart and turn their will towards good deeds, with the purpose of salvation.* Pr. Dumitru Belu has a significant approach to the sermon. According to him, the *sermon is the actualization of the Lord's prophetic activity*, insisting on the fact that *it is neither reading of sacred texts, nor mere paraphrasing or exegesis, but the interpretation of the divine message in the contemporary context*[8]. Under the influence of the Slavonic language, old homiletical literature also registered the term of „propovedanie" (*sl. проповѣдь - sermon*), hence the expression „a propovădui" – *to preach*. The types of sermon vary according to the service, context, audience, etc. The term „sermon" is very general, meaning any „church speech". Still, in homiletical practice, church speeches are divided into more categories, according to the type of service, place, purpose and the way in which they are delivered. The principle of distinction must be applied here: *bene docet qui bene distinguit (learns well he who distinguishes well)*. Thus, comparing the most recognized bibliographical sources with the liturgical reality in our Church, we admit the following distinct types of sermon in

[7] Cicero, *De Oratore*, X, 3, 37.
[8] Pr. D. Belu, *Homiletics Course*, BFT Sibiu, ms. 485, f.a., p. 32-33.

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use: *the homily, the thematic sermon (*also called *synthetical*), *the panegyric* and *the parenesis*[9].

The sermon – liturgical and synergic act. The sermon is not an isolated act, but always integrated within the divine church worship. It has been like this from the beginning. Religious gatherings in the Church of the first centuries had the following liturgical moments: breaking the bread, prayer and praise to God, reading from the holy books, *sermon* and religious chants, moments united with the brotherly repasts, collections for the poor and the manifestations of the gift of grace. The well-known testimonies from the Holy Scripture (*Acts* 2, 42; 20, 7 etc.) are completed with those from later writings, as, for example, *The First Apology*, written by St. Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: "And in the so-called Sun day, there is a gathering of all those living in towns or villages and the memories of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits. Afterwards, when the reader stops reading, *the first minister delivers a speech, giving advice and inviting people to imitate these wonderful teachings* (*ὁ προεστῶς διὰ λόγου τὴν νουθεσίαν καὶ πρόλησιν τῆς τῶν καλῶν τούτων μιμήσεως ποιεῖται*)" [10].

At the same time, *the sermon is a synergic act (of working together)*. The priest (*minister*) delivers the sermon, but the teaching is not from him, but from Christ (*2 Corinthiens* 4, 5), as it was mentioned above. Furthermore, the priest preaches due to his teaching power received by the grace of the Sacrament of Priesthood, but always renewed by the grace of the divine service within which he preaches. On the other hand, the priest's approach involves "working together", as he also teaches from his own experience and spiritual life, with a real impact in the hearts of the audience, but only as long as these teachings, pieces of advice, examples, etc. are in accordance with the Evangelical ones. With this view in mind, it seems obvious that the preacher does not merely repeat the Evangelical message, as the teaching received from the Church becomes part of himself; consequently, the message that he transmits and continues to be that of the Church, ends by becoming his own message, in an amazing and paradoxical way.

The Sermon - sacramental and soteriological role. According to the Christian doctrine, we reiterate the premise that man's sanctification and salvation are possible only through the grace granted by the Holy Sacraments. At the same time, realities and testimonies registered over 2000 years of Christianity prove that the sermon is not only a simple means of transmitting certain teachings, without any sacramental and soteriological implication. The sermon is actually the tool that can facilitate the access of the believers to the Holy Sacraments, but it can also consolidate their devotion to the Church, especially in what is related to the salvation of the soul. On the very birthday of the Church in history (the *Penticost*), those who listened to the sermon made by Saint Peter the Apostle *were* ***cut to the***

[9] See details at Pr. V. Gordon*, Introduction to Homiletics*, Edit. Univ. Bucureşti, 2001, p. 262-279 (ebooks.unibuc.ro/Teologie/omiletica/index.htm).

[10] Migne, PG, VI, col. 429. "Proestos" – "First minister": the bishop or the priest, coordinator of divine service.

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heart (*Acts* 2, 37)[11] and therefore determined to ask: „What shall we do?". We know what followed: the decision to be baptized, receiving thus the grace needed in order to enter the Kingdom of God. Being „cut/pricked in the heart" actually means a work of grace, namely „the grace of faith", as Saint Paul the Apostle confirms: „Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (*Romans* 10, 17). The wonderful example of the Pentecost has been repeated (and will repeat), obviously at different measures and „scales", all along the history. The three phases of preaching from the early Church, *kerygma, catechesis* and *the sermon*, are in fact made actual again and again in people's life. The Gospel was announced by kerygma (and here people were seized by the grace of faith), by catechesis people were instructed in order to prepare for baptism, whereas the sermon, made within the divine church service, became in this way a concrete liturgical act, with its well-known role. Nowadays (and until the end of times) we still have „candidates" to baptism, that can be pricked in their heart by a good sermon and thus determined to „put on Christ". On the other hand, the sermon can enforce the devotion to Christ and his Gospel for those who are baptized, by the same permanent deep experience of grace.

3. Some comparative examples

Further illustrations would be useful in order to better understand the importance of the reception of the religious discourse as source of divine grace. The grace of faith transmitted by the sermon can also be found in other forms and realities, related, of course, to the space and heritage of the Church: *the Holy Places* themselves *(painting, icons* etc.*)*, *the chants of the choir or around the lectern, pilgrimages, reading of the Holy Scripture* etc.

- *The Holy Church*, understood only as an art monument, will arouse admiration at the most and may inspire those who are initiated to descriptions and relevant analyses. Seen and respected as a sacred space, the Holy Church will fill up the visitors' souls, be them weak in faith, with the grace of the Holy Spirit and they will feel the warmth and the joy of the heart as essentially superior to the cold professional satisfactions of an atheist art critic, be him academician. The same situation occurs when somebody refers to icons, painting, chants of the church. The perspective is different if they are seen as „pieces of the sacred art" or as *sacred means* of transmission of the divine grace.

Before being an art monument, the church is a place of worship. In this respect, the attitude of certain employees of the National Office for Art Monuments or of the Art Monuments Commissions who treat churches only as museums and nothing more is unacceptable. That is why when they approve of a mural painting restoration, for example, they do not admit that the deteriorated face of a saint should be completed (because the law says that!), the result being a face partly painted and partly not. An intellectual Christian may understand the restoration

[11] Cf. English Standard Version. „Were *pricked* in their heart", according to King James Version.

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laws, but the poor ordinary peasant that came to pray in front of that saint, whose face he sees as mutilated, what will he understand? Only this: the present-day painters, with so much instruction and modern techniques, cannot remake what old-day painters like Pârvu Mutu and his mates would have done without any problems…

- *The chants of the choir or around the lectern* must also be seen in the context for which they were created, as text and melody, within the divine church service. Received as music art productions, they can, at most, enchant the ears; whereas if received as sacred means of creating an atmosphere of prayer, the chants will make the heart feel the grace. The optimum finality of chanting in the choir or around the lectern depends, undoubtedly, on the way it is approached by the chanters: it is one thing to use the texts as „pretexts" to show off your voice and it is totally different to be aware of the fact that your voice (*performance*) must serve the text with delicacy, modesty and humility;

- *Pilgrimages*, individual or in a group, organized at churches and monasteries are a wonderful opportunity of cleaning and renewing our heart. The main condition: not to behave as a tourist, but as a pilgrim; to try to integrate within the liturgical programme of that place and not to see it from outside, as an ordinary show. And one more condition: not to trouble in any way the sacred atmosphere of the place, but, if possible, to add some prayers, piety and meditation[12];

- *Reading of the Holy Scripture (and of any sacred text)* can be done in two ways: „from the outside" or „from the inside". In the first case, seeing in the sacred texts only literary species, valuable in terms of language and style; in the second case, recognizing their soteriological value, as well. From this extremely important point of view, we have a number of good examples, not only among the well-read clergymen, but also among lay cultivated people, philologists, philosophers, especially university professors. From among them, professor Eugen Negrici and Andrei Pleşu, philosopher, showed great persuasive force. The first one has distinguished himself for years by the pertinent exegeses made to the "Didaches*"* of Antim Ivireanul, the martyr hierarch and scholar. Analyzing their structural line, E. Negrici notices, not accidentally, that at the end of almost all his Didaches, Antim resorts to what is called „invocation", a prayer or a part of it which enhances considerably the sacramental and liturgical character of the respective sermon, along with its level of persuasion. The Metropolitan is humbly aware of the fact that „the things which are impossible with men are possible with God" (*St. Luke* 18, 27) and Prof. Negrici *sees* this aspect[13]. Andrei Pleşu, in his

[12] Father C. Coman, Professor of Biblical Studies at the Faculty of Theology in Bucharest, who had studied for many years in Greece, told us a very interesting experience in the Vathoped Monastery, whose abbot, Efrem, is his close friend. As long as he manifested as a favourite guest, he didn't feel any spiritual profit, except for the touristic special comfort. But, after the integration in the very hard community program (including the night's prayers), he felt a great spiritual joy, doubled with a fortification of his entire human being....

[13] E. Negrici, *Antim Ivireanul*, Ed. DU Style, Bucureşti, 1997, p. 18.

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turn, after having surprised us so pleasantly by his book *Despre Îngeri (On Angels)* [14], proves to be an extremely well-intentioned researcher of the meaning of the Lord's Parables, in his volume *Parabolele lui Iisus. Adevărul ca poveste (Jesus' Parables. The truth as a Story)*[15]. Annoyed at first by the Lord's paradoxical words: „Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not: and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand!" and „it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given" (*St. Matthew* 13, 13, 11; Ed. Anania), Pleşu finally discovers, not without consistent bibliographic support, that only those that are *inside* can understand... Namely, concisely expressed, *those who, by their life and deeds are on the way to the Kingdom of God*[16].

Instead of conclusions: **the wisdom of being „inside"**

We realistically admit that the religious text and discourse can be read, heard and discussed also from the „outside". Any specialist in the subtle aspects of philological sciences has access to them, according to their faith, denomination, religion. The fundamental problem is, nevertheless, that of the meaning. The specialist who is also liturgically integrated has the possibility to observe, to experience directly the sacramental and soteriological nature of religious texts and discourses, essentially more important than the literary value of the language and style as such. That is why we were happy to see good examples even among the authors of studies and articles for the Magazine of the Conference „Religious Text and Discourse". We may have seen more than intended by certain authors, but we consider that the error is smaller *when seeing, well-intentioned, something that is not, then intentionally ignoring what is there*. For example, Prof. V. Ţâra mentions the fact that „sermons influence the audience's spiritual experience and life…" (*The religous discourse, model and norm…*,2009); Prof. Carmen Dura, analyzing the sermons of His Eminence Bartolomeu Anania, shows the soteriological importance of the belief in resurrection (*Rhetoric of religious discourse…*, 2012); Prof. Sorin Guia sees the sermon as „a call to repentance" (*Structures argumentatives dans le discours religieux de Bucovine* – 2012); Prof. Rodica Zafiu admirably describes the function of the ethos in obtaining persuasion (along with that of the pathos and the logos), as a means of transmitting „something" from the holiness of the speakers' personality, not only certain teaching (*Ethos, pathos and logos in the text of the sermon predicii* - 2010). Moreover, Acad. Gh. Chivu consacrated the phrase „From letter to spirit" as a leitmotiv of many conferences.

It was a great joy to find such examples within the studies of some of the most recognized philologists. This is actually what we have in view within the texts of the sermons: a meaning that goes beyond the letter, meaning that has been brought forward by all the preachers, from our Saviour Jesus Christ to the present-day

[14] Humanitas, 2003; ed. a II-a, 2010.
[15] Humanitas, 2012.
[16] To understand the report "outside – inside", see especially p. 66-67.

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hierarchs and priests. And not only priests and hierarchs, as we could see. It is a great joy that we can find among contemporary philologists personalities that, by their writings and mission, directly and indirectly support the message and the mission of the Church, as in the more distant or more recent past did well-known lay intellectuals such as Simion Mehedinţi, Nicolae Paulescu, Vasile Băncilă, Nae Ionescu, Onisifor Ghibu, Petre Ţuţea, Ioan Alexandru, along with contemporary representatives such as Sorin Dumitrescu, Costion Nicolescu, Andrei Pleşu, etc.

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